Action Learning as a Tool for Strategic Leadership in Higher Education: An Empirical Study

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The thesis aims to provide an empirical study of an attempt to introduce an Action Learning Set at departmental level within the organizational context of a College of Higher Education. The starting-point for the study is the notion that an academic leader introducing action learning to a department for which he or she is responsible might reduce the dissonance often experienced in educational organizations when institutional management paradigms conflict with the educational values and pedagogical principles underpinning the institution.

A range of literature is examined, from that on leadership, organizational culture and change management, to a number of specific texts on higher education management. The use of action learning is considered within and beyond higher education, particularly in its use as a means of strategic leadership.

A discussion on methodological issues focuses on specific research questions which were revised over the course of the study, and considers ethical and practical issues which underline the study.

The thesis presents a case study narrative based on the experience of the Action Learning Set over a sequence of six set meetings, and the resultant analysis of data gathered. The data is supplemented by post-experience interviews.

The period of the study coincided with a time of considerable turbulence in the higher education sector in the wake of the 2003 White Paper, including the introduction of top-up fees in September 2006. This made a significant impact on the specific institution and the department in which the research was based, and this is evident in the data gathered and analysed.

The research concludes that the success of action learning, particularly in a setting where professional education is practised, depends not only on the interplay of professional knowledge, questioning and reflection, identified

originally by Revans (1980) as P, Q and R, but also on appropriate tension between affective factors and those concerning the organizational politics of the institution where action learning is situated.

A number of points are identified for potential action by future researchers, including the need to investigate the transferability from the team learning in an action learning set to the development of collective capacity for leadership development across an institution of higher education. It is also suggested that it would be valuable to conduct empirical research on the use of action learning in other settings in higher education, including those of senior management teams.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ALS	Action Learning Set
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HESDA	Higher Education Staff Development Agency
HRM	Human Resource Management
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
INTED	School of International Education
LFHE	Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
LTSN	Learning and Teaching Subject Network
NCSL	National College for School Leadership
NHS	National Health Service
SMAL	Self-Managed Action Learning
TDA	Training and Development Agency
TDAP	Taught Degree-Awarding Powers

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I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Principal of the College for supporting the research project as institutional leader, and for enabling me, as my line manager, to take study leave in order to complete the first draft of the thesis.

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Paul Gentle

CHAPTER 1. Introduction and Context

Summary of the Work Undertaken

This thesis tells of an investigation into the use of action learning as a tool for strategic leadership at middle management - departmental - level in higher education. The investigation was simultaneously an initiative in staff development (a deliberate attempt to distribute leadership more widely across the department) and a piece of action research resulting from which the researcher hoped to develop his knowledge and understanding of his own leadership practices, and to make improvements in these practices as a result.

Over a five-month sequence during one academic semester, and following a preparation period of some two years beforehand, the researcher (a middle manager in higher education, as Dean of an academic School in a small to medium-sized institution of higher education in England) initiated and subsequently recorded and selectively transcribed monthly meetings of an action learning set (ALS).

There were six voluntary participants, representing the full hierarchical range of the departmental staff (including lecturers, an administrative assistant and Dean – the researcher). Each ALS session lasted around two hours, and enabled one participant to act as facilitator, while the other members 'presented' and reflected on their specific issues and challenges relating to the long-term 'project' they had identified at the outset as their vehicle for action learning. As attendance at each ALS varied according to availability, and there was no single session where all members were present simultaneously, the maximum number of presenters was usually three at any one session. Some eight months after the final ALS session, each participant took part in a semi-structured individual interview which – together with the ALS sessions themselves – was recorded and selectively transcribed.

The internal culture of the School was one which placed strong value on professional learning. There was an extremely low level of staff turnover, and a clear sense of team which derived probably from many years of working together on overseas-based training and consultancy projects.

At the start of the research project, none of the participants had experienced action learning, though they had read about it, and some had taken part in a staff development discussion on action learning a few months ahead of the pilot session. The pilot session, in May 2004, was facilitated by an experienced colleague from elsewhere in the institution. It was followed, from February to June 2006, by a sequence of five ALS sessions, at intervals of between three and six weeks.

Institutional Context

In the educational context which is the focus of the research, my role was to manage significant parts of the enterprise activity of the university college of higher education in which I worked (hereafter "the College"), with a brief to increase net financial contribution to fund the expansion of the institution. In securing international and regional commercial income, the financial accounts for this area of work must by definition remain separate from the public funding streams which paid for mainstream teaching and learning activity.

As a result, the School I led from October 2001 to July 2007 was to a large extent a separate entity which shared some characteristics with a small business. During the period of the study, from January 2004 to December 2006, the School of International Education (INTED) was one of six Schools within the College. It was tasked with being both an academic department (specialising in capacity-building work in developing-world education systems) and overseeing and implementing the institution's International Strategy. There were 17 members of staff in the School at the start of the study, and I spent 70% of my time as Dean of International Education. The action learning set in

INTED (which is the focus of this thesis) comprised myself and five voluntary staff members, both academic and administrative, of the School.

I also managed a small Regional Affairs team which helped to deliver the College's Regional Engagement Strategy. It was designed to support internal capacity-building in order to enable a growing proportion of College staff to work with organizations in the business and community sectors. 30% of my time was spent as Director of Regional Affairs.

There was a sense in which these roles complemented each other, in that they both involved the positioning of the College in relation to external audiences, including funding bodies, project partners and commercial clients. Both demanded a particular approach to leadership and the championing of change, in response to environments which could often be harshly volatile. Nevertheless, there were significant differences between the operational and political realities of each role.

The Regional Affairs role was new for the institution, and involved seeking out increasing numbers of academic staff who might be interested in undertaking applied research, consultancy or training work with external organizations. There was a range of funding measures which could be used to pump-prime such activity, and as this funding was available over several years, there was a sense in which engagement of staff was an organic process. It was not a question of imminent survival, but of evolutionary change. Between September 2004 and July 2006, the proportion of the academic staff involved in this regional engagement activity increased from 4% to 20% (of a total of some 120 academics). There was a clear sense in which I was seen by my peers and senior managers to be succeeding in this role.

INTED was perceived quite differently across the institution, for a variety of largely historical reasons. The first of these was this it did not conform to the income and expenditure model of the other Schools of the College, due to the nature of the work it undertook. Instead of receiving block funding based on

contracted student numbers from a UK government agency (such as HEFCE, TDA or the NHS), its income derived from dozens of separate sources each year, including private individuals, non-governmental organizations, ministries of education, British Council national offices and so on. This income was volatile and unpredictable, in that at the beginning of any financial year, less than 75% of income was secure – the remainder came from competitive bidding processes, approaches from potential clients and sometimes serendipitous sources. In times of growing financial insecurity for the institution as a whole, and changing financial culture due to pressures from government for full-cost accounting, the notion of INTED as a 'cash cow' whose additional contribution had always been welcome became threatened. Indeed, the College was now dependent on INTED making a net contribution of 40% of its gross tuition income in order to cover its overheads.

In previous years, there had been an unwritten set of assumptions as to the reasons why INTED could not be expected to operate according to the model of the rest of the institution: much of its work was carried out overseas, and therefore did not draw on campus-based services; INTED provided a recruitment, welfare and language support service to the College as a whole, none of which had been formally costed or charged for. Suddenly, during the course of the 2004/5 financial year, it became clear that the senior management was determined to bring about radical changes in practice. This began to manifest itself through the instigation of a 'root and branch' review of activity in the School of INTED, as part of an institution-wide Academic Portfolio Review.

During the period of investigation, I experienced many of the pressures discussed by Floyd and Wooldridge (1996, 2000) in carrying out my middle management role. I no longer questioned the fact that I was a middle manager, rather than a senior leader in the institution, as a new grouping emerged (in which I was not included) which took responsibility for all decisions on Planning and Resources. This grouping of five colleagues from the wider Management Team (of which I was a member) reported directly to the Principal

on ways of implementing the rather inflexible 'Resource Allocation Model' introduced by the Principal in 2003.

The College also submitted an application for Taught Degree-Awarding Powers to the Quality Assurance Agency, and experienced in 2005/6 a series of 'engagements' to determine the rigour and validity of quality systems, for which financial control mechanisms were seen by the College as critical.

Although the colleagues with whom I worked shared a strong professional commitment which was characterized by clear educational values (usually framed in terms of capacity-building and empowerment among the international professional communities with whom we worked), there was a growing tendency, reinforced by the prevailing institutional culture, for organizing our work activity according to more bureaucratic requirements. By 2003, this had resulted in a mismatch between our espoused educational principles, applied successfully in the classroom and in training and consultancy work, and our everyday reality in managing the School. There was therefore significant opportunity for change in the way we led and managed our work.

Because of my professional discomfort with the prevailing situation, and my longstanding interest in trends in leadership and management in education, I was particularly interested in research questions (detailed in Chapter 3) which stemmed from a fascination with the idea of leading in a learning organization of the sort identified by Senge (1990), Burgoyne et al (1991, 1994), Garratt (2001) and Sheffield Hallam University (2003).

Developments in the Institutional Context during the period of study

(See Appendix 1 for a diagrammatic presentation of the ALS in the institutional context.)

In May 2004, at the start of the work leading to the Initial Study (when the Action Learning Set met for the first time), the College had been engaged in

significant processes of change since the appointment, less than a year previously, of a new Principal with a strong drive for institutional reform. During his first year in post, this Principal concluded that the College had failed to position itself strategically enough in respect of its market position, its relationships with key partner organizations, its stance on research, and its capacity to generate significant income from sources other than the funding councils (HEFCE, TDA).

The *Strategic Plan 2010*, approved by the Academic Board in July 2004, provided the basis for action towards twelve key objectives, two of which concerned the areas of work which I led on behalf of the institution (international education and regional engagement with employers and other partners). It became increasingly apparent during the academic year 2004/5 that the income derived from both these areas of work was critical to the College being able to retain a positive financial balance. In the wake of clawbacks from both funding agencies totaling almost £300,000, the net contribution, by 2005/6 of almost half a million pounds from my areas of work, was vital to institutional success.

As a result, the College financial system (vested in the Principal, Deputy Principal – Business and Administration, and the Management Accountant) demonstrated increasing concern with respect not only to reducing the risk factors inherent in this international and regional income, but also to increasing the percentage of overhead contribution from it. For the first time in three years, this placed my work, and the degree of autonomy with which I carried it out, under close scrutiny. As a 'business leader', I was under greater pressure from the stakeholders to whom I reported, and was forced to think harder about the strategic decisions I was involved in.

This made it all the more important to use approaches to management and leadership which were conducive to enhanced involvement and performance by the staff for whom I was responsible. At the same time, it also impacted

negatively on the time I had available to devote to continuing the work of the Action Learning Set, which in the words of Rooke and Torbert is:

> "all too easily sacrificed in the face of short-term objectives, which can seem more pressing" (2005: 9).

This context provided an interesting baseline from which to trace the development of the research project over the three years from January 2004 to December 2006, during which further instability ensued. The reduction in teacher training places for the primary sector, and the uncertainty surrounding the introduction of higher tuition fees from 2006/7, each created their own financial and political pressures in the institution. However, these factors did not in themselves necessarily militate against the validity or the success of the practice of developing action learning sets. Indeed, as Senge (1990) and others have argued, it is to systemic change which learning organizations must respond.

There was, therefore, a challenge to the manner in which I led in my School, and by implication to the very notion of distributed leadership, open dialogue and team-based working which the Action Learning Set was attempting to reinforce. Whereas the Principal spoke directly on several occasions about the desirability of voluntary redundancies as a means of bringing about cost savings, my own belief was that reductions in the School's capacity would most likely lead to a downward spiral in income, and consequently a lower net financial contribution to the institution. Despite the failure to meet the newly-introduced financial target of 40% of income in 2004/5, there was nevertheless a significant net contribution of over £200,000.

One optimistic way of viewing this potential 'cultural crisis' was to regard it as a key test for the Action Learning Set, and its ability to bring about the kind of innovative and co-operative thought and action required to address the challenges faced by the School. However, there was also the possibility that events might overtake the research project, and – in the worst case scenario – that I might not survive the professional challenges ahead.

The Academic Portfolio Review process reached its conclusion in the form of a report which was presented by the Chair of the Review panel to the institution's Academic Board in early December 2005. The Board agreed that the College's International Strategy would be rewritten over the following three months, with careful consideration given to the role of the School of International Education.

This led to a tangible sense of demotivation on the part of many staff, and a feeling that the College neither valued nor understood the work in which they were engaged.

This situation reinforced still further the dilemmas of the strategic middle manager to be discussed in Chapter 2, but ironically perhaps, allowed for greater potential for impact of the Action Learning Set.

During the Spring and Summer of 2006, much of the uncertainty surrounding the medium-term viability of the School of International Education was resolved through the successful negotiation by the Deputy Principal (Business and Administration) with three colleagues for terms of voluntary severance. This meant that a reduction of one-third of the permanent academic staff in the School would be achieved by early 2007, thus staving off the immediate danger of any further cuts. As a result, some relief was felt by the remaining members of the School.

It is worth commenting that during Autumn 2006, the Principal (having experienced action learning as a participant on the Top Management Programme before he was appointed to the College) attempted to introduce an ALS experience for members of the College's Diversity Committee and Management Team. The purpose of the set was to have guided the Diversity Committee, with assistance from senior and middle managers, in carrying out its key tasks. After one attempt to establish the process using an external facilitator with parallel sets, the experiment was abandoned. This top-down

initiative seemed to be an example of what Pedler et al call Business-Driven Action Learning, in which:

> "...groups work on projects identified by senior managers and make recommendations for action... there is much less emphasis on the personal development aspects...This form has sometimes been described as being more akin to that of the taskforce rather than action learning" (2005: 62).

A longer 'lead-in' time might have been beneficial - as was the case with the INTED ALS – in order to prepare potential ALS members for the experience.

In the School of INTED, two of the six ALS members were no longer working permanently for the institution at the time of the individual interviews being recorded in early 2007, and this might be expected to impact on their reflections on the ALS experience.

There was a palpable sense of grieving on the part of the remaining staff members during the Autumn term of 2006, and a commonly-held view was that workloads for those who had not left would inevitably become heavier. As a result, it was common for colleagues to be heard describing motivation as being at a historically-low ebb. This corresponds strongly with the experiences reported by Bottery (2006), who attributes a prevailing culture of unhappiness and lack of trust in educational institutions to a range of global, national and local forces which result in managers being driven by

> "...a stream of directives, targets and steers in order to leave no room for deviation or mistakes. It is an attempt at the creation of predictable, error-free, and risk-less organisations in which educational professionals do not need to be trusted in any but the most minimal sense because everything is so controlled, so micro-managed..." (2006: 196)

As such, Bottery argues, institutional cultures are inimical to nurturing 'learning communities'. Indeed, he points out that this largely uncontested term

can be hijacked by neo-conservatives to serve the interests of developing 'intellectual capital' within a 'knowledge economy' (2006: 188).

Bottery's analysis sheds light on how the notion of leadership which I sought to explore and to apply was seen as potentially subversive by power-holders in the institution.

This felt somewhat like the position I was in by the end of the study period. A successful residential Awayday event in mid-December 2006 led to the staff team re-examining the values statement of the School, and adding a new category of Innovation and Creativity, which was felt to fuel the organizational recovery which was then beginning to materialise. This event draws the line on the portrayal of the institutional context for the purposes of the thesis.

The extent to which the School was itself a learning community will be explored in the case study. Nevertheless, a brief questionnaire instrument used in February 2007 (see Appendix 5) revealed a clear view of the School as a learning community, with little difference in response between those colleagues who had or had not participated in the Action Learning Set.

Hypothesis and Propositions

The *hypothesis* which forms a starting-point for my research project is that, since action learning is used very little as a voluntary means of improving the quality of discourse and professional development which informs leadership in higher education, an attempt to change this state of affairs through conducting a longitudinal action research project at departmental level might produce findings of wider interest for the higher education sector as a whole.

The study aims to examine the effect of implementing action learning as a supportive mechanism in driving forward institutional change at departmental ('School') or faculty level. From the outset of the action research, there was a clear expectation, supported by the Principal, that learning derived from this

specific change project might be transferable to other aspects of strategic leadership across the institution.

While this presented an opportunity with great potential, it was not unproblematic in its implications for the direction and operation of the research project, and this is considered later in the thesis.

The thesis aims to investigate a number of claims made for action learning in the literature. These are presented in the following Chapter as *research propositions* which are then discussed specifically in the context of the case study presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 2. Literature Review

In reviewing critically the literature which illuminates the study of action learning as a strategic leadership tool in higher education, it is important to consider the wider field of writing on leadership and management, both in education and, where relevant, in business.

After establishing some key themes against which to set issues relating to the research project, I will then proceed to examine the literature which focuses specifically on the higher education sector. Here, consideration will need to be given to distinctions between management and leadership, and the extent to which the latter, as interpreted by institutions established in support of public sector reform in education, such as the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the National College for School Leadership, is gaining prominence in terms of policy, funding and changing practices in the university sector.

Finally, I will investigate the application of action learning to organizational leadership and learning, and its impact in higher education.

Strategic Leadership and Management in Business and Education

There is a growing sense globally of convergence between the worlds of business and education. At the same time as schools conceive of themselves as companies with a continuous focus on cost-effectiveness and value to the customer, commercial enterprises are increasingly discovering the worth of learning and social responsibility as intellectual and cultural capital.

Key leadership and management texts in the fields both of education and business pay homage to the concept of developing the learning organization as part of the repertoire of staff development measures available to progressive entities.

In the United Kingdom, a plethora of well-documented initiatives exists to promote mutual understanding between the two worlds, and mentoring and coaching between the sectors of business and education are now becoming increasingly commonplace for participants of almost all ages and job levels. Action Learning, too, is becoming increasingly recognized as having a part to play in supporting continuous improvement in knowledge-based organizations (O'Hara et al [2004], Pedler et al [2005]).

The literature of strategic leadership and management is of interest, as it establishes a number of key elements, found in much published work – including that by Handy (1990) and Goodman (1995) which are likely to be relevant for most educational institutions as well as businesses.

Firstly, there is the notion of competitive advantage as based on distinctive capabilities: the extent to which innovation, reputation and location enable higher education institutions to position themselves is becoming crucial to diversity of mission and to student choice. The inducement given to higher education institutions to reform, through top-up tuition fees (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), has arguably led to stronger differentiation and market positioning.

Innovation might be expressed in terms of teaching and learning approaches, curriculum design, assessment, student-centred service provision, staff development, and most importantly in the context of my research, in approaches to management and leadership.

Reputation, as measured in published 'league tables', is usually taken in higher education to refer to institutions' quality and standards, student achievement, research output, and graduate employability. Responsibility for performance indicators in all these areas is usually vested in middle managers such as Deans and Heads of Department, and any attempt to lead staff in order to produce improvements depends on the strategic decisions taken by these leaders (Harvey and Knight, 1996). The research project aims to examine ways in

which decision-making can be informed by stronger organizational cultures at departmental level.

Location is clearly of crucial importance – whether or not an institution is the single provider of higher education in a city is as relevant as whether or not it forms part of a conscious or coincidental 'cluster' of such institutions in a city or sub-region. Architectural design is also increasingly important, and investment in new university buildings is a significant contributor to community regeneration.

Secondly, the need for environmental scanning and analysis is arguably as great for educational managers as it is for those in private enterprises, not least because of the growing emphasis placed by the UK Government not only on competition, but also on working in partnerships and networks. The very purpose of agencies such as NCSL and LFHE lies in promoting and disseminating collaborative research between practitioners.

Thirdly, the concept of the value chain is relevant to education, in terms of product design, marketing, distribution, service provision, monitoring and enhancement. This will become increasingly critical as students pay rising levels of tuition fees.

However, although broad concepts transfer successfully from the corporate world to education, at the level of detail the generic literature is arguably unhelpful. It is perhaps for this reason that a wide field of literature which is specifically focused on educational management has emerged over the last thirty years. Much of this literature consciously sets out to 'interpret' the work of business thinkers for managers in education, ostensibly eliminating the need for educationalists to read the source material in its original form.

One example of this can be found in Anderson (2003: 11-26), who, in writing on managing people in education, draws on management gurus such as Handy, Hofstede and Peters, and on texts in the field of personnel and human resource

management (HRM). She manages skillfully to blend her extra-educational reading with studies on school management and specialist texts on managing staff development in education settings.

She highlights the common contemporary educational theme of managers as leaders of learning (2003: 12).

This theme is echoed in the evangelizing literature of NCSL, which refers self-consciously to head teachers and heads of department as 'lead learners', and is central to my own focus in the ALS on aligning management behaviours with the educational values which are manifest in programmes of teaching and learning.

Anderson discusses a matrix - from Steers and Porter (1991) – of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards as used in education, and the extent to which these are individually or collectively provided. The collective rewards of CPD, collegiality, relationships with colleagues and feelings of being valued by significant others – all are of direct relevance to the ALS, and are investigated in this thesis through the use of a participant questionnaire and of interview accounts.

Collegiality, teamwork and distributed leadership are considered of value by Belbin (2000), Fullan (2001), Senge (1990) and NCSL (2004). Belbin claims that "...the mature team can be gauged by its learning." (2000: 72)

Fullan asserts that in order to achieve a culture of change,

> "Leadership must be cultivated deliberately over time at all levels of the organization." (2001: *x*)

Although Fullan makes no reference to the work of Revans (1983) or of Senge (1990), he is clearly talking about achieving similar ends:

> "your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective… *by what leadership you produce in others*" (2001: 137).

Senge advocates the bottom-up change which can be achieved by team learning, in contrast to Anderson's assertion (2003: 20) that culture stems from the learning values and behaviour of the 'overall leader':

> "The team's accomplishments can set the tone and establish a standard for learning together for the larger organization" (Senge, 1990: 236).

Rooke and Torbert (2005) focus on analyzing leadership in terms of the ways in which action is handled by managers:

> "…what differentiates leaders is not so much their philosophy of leadership, their personality, or their style of management. Rather, it's their internal "action logic" – how they interpret their surroundings and react when their power or safety is challenged" (2005: 1).

They define 'Seven Action Logics' into which practitioners fall on the basis of a sentence-completion survey tool. Six of the seven 'action logics' appear to be relevant to key players involved in this research project, and are characterized by the figure below.

Action Logic	Characteristics	Strengths	% of Rooke and Torbert's research sample profiling at this action logic	Corresponding key members of College staff
Opportunist	*Wins any way possible.* Self-oriented; manipulative; "might makes right."	Good in emergencies and in sales opportunities	5%	
Diplomat	*Avoids overt conflict.* Wants to belong; obeys group norms; rarely rocks the boat.	Good as supportive glue within an office; helps bring people together	12%	

Expert	*Rules by logic and expertise*. Seeks rational efficiency.	Good as an individual contributor.	38%	Most INTED staff members
Achiever	*Meets strategic goals.* Effectively achieves goals through teams; juggles managerial duties and market demands.	Well suited to managerial roles; action and goal oriented.	30%	Dean/researcher (first 3 years of appointment); 1 other ALS member
Individualist	*Interweaves competing personal and company action logics.* Creates unique structures to resolve gaps between strategy and performance	Effective in venture and consulting roles	10%	Dean/researcher (next 3 years: period of research)
Strategist	*Generates organizational and personal transformations.* Exercises the power of mutual inquiry, vigilance, and vulnerability for both the short and long term.	Effective as a transformational leader.	4%	Researcher in context of Director of Regional Affairs post
Alchemist	*Generates social transformations.* Integrates material, spiritual, and societal transformation.	Good at leading society-wide transformations.	1%	-

Fig. 2.1 Seven Action Logics in the context of the College. Adapted from Rooke and Torbert (2005: 3)

The narrative of the article provides further exemplification of behaviours. Of particular interest is the attention given by Rooke and Torbert to processes of transition from one action logic to another. To move from the Expert to Achiever orientations, which was my intention in attempting to enable more distributed leadership,

> "...speaking and listening must come to be experienced not as necessary, taken-for-granted ways of communicating predetermined ideas but as intrinsically forward-thinking, creative actions. Achievers use inquiry to determine whether they (and the teams and organization to which they belong) are accomplishing their goals and how they might accomplish them more effectively. ...plans that set new goals, are

> generated through probing and trusting conversation, are actively supported through executive coaching…can be critical enablers at this point" (2005: 9).

This provides a strong argument for using action learning.

Organizational Culture and the Learning Organization

The literature of organizational development is of interest where it refers to the impact of leadership on culture, and in particular where this also relates to the notion of organizational learning. The literature commonly referred to in these interlocking circles is well-charted, and it appears possible to discern its limits through selective reading of articles and books in the field. The same key authors appear frequently and consistently in citations, even where the organizational context varies significantly in geographical location, sector of activity, or developmental focus. Senge (1990), Argyris (1982) and Schon (1993) are seminal influences in mapping the territory and revisiting it frequently. Phrases such as 'personal mastery', 'team learning' and 'shared vision' have now become so commonplace in everyday language that it is difficult to trace their origins.

Such interpersonal capacities are very similar to the characteristics of successful leaders identified by Jones (1996), West-Burnham and Ireson (1995) and, in the context of higher education, the LFHE (2005).

A number of writers provide guidelines as to the definition and classification of organizational cultures, many of which are applicable to frameworks of departmental culture in HE. Drennan describes culture as

> "…what is typical of the organisation, the habits, the prevailing attitudes, the grown-up pattern of accepted and expected behaviour." (1992: 3)

The dichotomy between 'command and control' and collaborative working which is frequently manifested between senior and middle layers of management in higher education institutions (Ramsden 1998; Harvey and Knight, 1996) acts as a barrier to realizing organizational learning.

Denton sheds light on a further dichotomy in the form of the tension between what he defines as "the two key management ideas of the 1990s" (1998: 205) – the trend towards downsizing/re-engineering/outsourcing, versus organizational learning. He presents a valuable critical evaluation of organizational learning in terms of its direct relationship to organizational effectiveness and building competitive advantage, conducting his research through five case studies in large corporations, and analyzing each in strategic, structural and cultural dimensions. His analysis is theoretically-linked to the concepts of the leader as designer, steward and teacher, articulated by Senge and others, and leads him to report on what he concludes to be the benefits of distributed leadership, self-managing teams and coaching and mentoring.

Action learning is claimed by its advocates to be a resource for organizational development in various ways, as follows:

- it is an effective way of "dramatically increasing systemwide learning" (Marquardt, 1996: 229);
- it is "potentially the most appropriate vehicle... for the concept of the learning organization" (Mumford, 1994: 85);
- it requires commitment from participants to know their desired future "before [they] receive any guidance and advice on how to get there" (Margerison, 1994: 116);
- it contributes to improvement in customer perceptions of frontline employees if they are ALS participants, as they "naturally... became more positive" (Easterby-Smith et al, 1997: 341);
- it involves participants "in a shared process of meaning-making" (Pedler, 1997a: 71).

All these claims risk being seen as naïve assertions unless they can be tested reliably, and much of the propositionally-based literature of the 1990s fails to convince due to lack of empirical evidence.

One of the key aspects in which critical thinking is exercised in the literature is that of the power dimension in organizational learning. Garratt is typical of many writers in stating that action learning represents a potential threat to vested power interests, and risks instability through "uncovering the inadequacies of the organization" (1997: 16). This will become an important dimension for further exploration in subsequent chapters, as it informs both the methodology and findings of the research project.

In his constant re-articulations of systems thinking, Revans regarded organizational political factors as critical to the conditions for success of what he calls an "autonomous learning system" (1997: 44). He stresses the importance of "the morale of the organization" (ibid.), and even implies that local sub-cultures can vary greatly between different sections of the same organization, which may range from "constantly and fruitfully working out autonomous solutions to its own problems" (ibid.) to being "an organizational sore, running with irresoluble conflict and unendurable frustration" (ibid.).

This thesis represents an attempt to document a 'lived experience' in the evolution of a departmental culture in higher education in the early twenty-first century which might be representative of experience in the sector as a whole.

The Role of Middle Managers

There is in the literature a contrast between texts which refer to leadership as practised by those at the most senior levels of HEIs (Roberts, 1994; Weil, 1994) and those which focus on the challenges faced by those leading at middle management layers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996, 2000; Hawkins, 1994) – Hawkins sees the latter as strategic leaders, portraying them as "the lifeblood of the learning organisation" (1994: 16).

Floyd and Wooldridge are significant aides to my understanding of my job, and of the need for the research to address aspects of internal organizational politics. Their earlier work is based on their survey of 275 managers across 25 organizations, which led to identifying a framework of four strategic roles performed by middle managers – although more than 75% of managers' time is not spent on them (1996: 126-7). The roles are identified as championing, facilitating, implementing and synthesizing, and they are discussed in more detail in relation to my own experience in Chapter 5.

The later work by Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) seems focused on setting the original research from the previous book into a more robust theoretical framework, and linking it to other research which supports the authors' findings. They provide a helpful survey of research on strategy, criticising what they see as over-emphasis on top management, and "strategy making as being predominantly a decision-making process." Their view is rather that "strategy formation is a middle-level social learning process" (2000: 15), which positions ALS meetings very much at the heart of strategic leadership, rather than as merely peripheral and experimental activity.

The book considers the concept of 'Strategic Renewal',

> "a managerial process associated with promoting and accommodating new knowledge and innovative behaviour that results in change in an organisation's product-market strategy and/or its core capabilities" (2000: 49).

This is very much at the heart of the potential outcomes of the ALS project, so it is encouraging to see later in the book that the authors do

> "not rule out deliberate efforts on the part of management to facilitate organisational learning." (2000: 111)

The authors focus on a model of innovation driving emergent strategy through using social networks, chiming with the role of NCSL in promoting collaborative practice in educational leadership and school improvement.

In concluding, they identify three categories where further research is needed, including that of investigating the relationships between intraorganizational conditions and strategic renewal, where "empirical studies examining critical relationships are needed" (2000: 139). This provides some indication of the positioning of my research work in the field.

Leadership and the Learning Organization in Higher Education

Boyle and Bowden (1997) identify a range of cultural issues to consider when change or development is being aspired to in HEIs. They cite strongly-defended notions of academic individualism among lecturers, and their lack of interest in corporate loyalty. Furthermore, they contend that lecturers resist organized training, prioritise research above teaching, and find Quality Assurance processes to be insulting in their perceived devaluation of the role of academic staff. As further justification for their reluctance to compare academics to business personnel, they also criticise the senior managers of universities for their failure to integrate strategic planning, performance evaluation and staff development.

Although this analysis may still pertain to some institutions, it appears to be too much of a caricature in 2008 to be of relevance, and certainly does not apply to the context under investigation in this thesis.

In terms of identifying a typology of HEIs in the late 1990s, the work of Scott (1996) and particularly McNay (1995) defines four institutional models as Collegium, Bureaucracy, Corporation and Enterprise. The latter suggests that the dominant pattern of change for UK universities is to move towards the Enterprise model.

McCaffery supports this analysis, identifying what for him are the key attractions of an Enterprise university:

> "...its orientation is as much external as it is internal. The management style is supportive of devolved leadership and decision making and is centred on project teams. Evaluation is based on attracting repeat business and students are treated as valued customers." (2004: 33)

Harvey and Knight (1996: 147) take a radical stance in offering perspectives to those managing at faculty or departmental level, on the assumption that HE needs "considered deconstruction and reconstruction." In their review of the impact of influences on students' learning experience, they considered a variety of categories of response and found that

> "the most important...referred to leadership by deans and departmental heads" (1996: 166).

They suggest that training and development which lead to fundamental changes in assessment of students' learning are keys to ways forward, although they are aware that there are no perfect solutions:

> "The bad news is that not only do departments not have the knowledge to [be responsible for the professional development of academic staff that is necessary for transformative learning], there is very little knowledge to call upon." (1996: 166)

Harvey and Knight identify approaches which range from the use of external consultants, to the development of learning policies, the provision of half-day seminars and conferences, and the implementation of action research projects. They feel that an explicit awareness in academics of the research literature underpinning educational development would be constructive and could lead ultimately to an enhancement of the sense of self-esteem which should ideally be experienced by all students and academic staff.

Hopkins suggests a number of implications from the experience of school improvement in the 1980s for change management in HEIs, though he considers that these are rarely implemented in practice (2002: 16). Other literature from the school sector is informative: a review of trends in educational management development emphasizes the importance of the learning organization for schools (Hallinger and Snidvongs, 2005: 9 – 10), but fails to mention action learning; recent resource materials from NCSL place the challenge of creating, developing and sustaining a 'professional learning community' as a "major strategic leadership and management task" (2006: 8).

These ideas are helpful to my research, in that four of the six projects identified by members of the School's Action Learning Set concern changes in leading students' learning, focusing respectively on learner autonomy, learning and teaching strategies, curriculum content, and on reflective learning, as shown in the case study.

With the public funding support of organizations such as the Higher Education Academy and the LFHE, the last few years have seen the emergence of web-based literature which aims to disseminate thinking and practice on change management in higher education. In one such publication, Trowler et al draw on a range of theoretical models of change to consider their implications for practice (2003: 7). They also provide the helpful observation for my work, that:

> "While it is common to try and change people's thinking, we see a lot of value in using tools and expertise to change practices: beliefs can follow." (2003: 21)

The introduction of action learning in my context is a clear example of such a tool which can change practices. The extent to which it achieved this purpose is considered later.

McCaffery sets out to provide an overview of current issues in higher education in order to shed light on

> "...those prerequisites which are essential to effective management and leadership in HE" (2004: 4).

In addressing a very similar agenda to that of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (in which he is an influential activist), McCaffery does not set out to produce a scholarly text, which may explain some of the limitations of his engagement with theory. Instead, his intention is to provide a resource 'manual' for self- and peer development among university managers, drawing on summaries of the literature (often citing magazine articles rather than scholarly journals) and on case studies which have emerged from his own experience. There is some exploration of the sometimes overlapping concepts of leadership and management. For instance, McCaffery cites four of the key organizational functions of the visionary leader as:

> "managing change; achieving goals; coordinating teamwork; maintaining a vibrant organizational culture." (2004: 66)

At least some of these functions are surely classic management functions.

Nevertheless, McCaffery provides a typology of staff development activity (2004: 188), including in it "collaborative workshops" which he categorizes as 'Collective Development' in support of departmental development (2004: 188). However, it is disappointing that action learning and action research do not receive a mention in McCaffery's book.

A report by Sheffield Hallam University proposes that HEIs should:

> "- Ensure all development programmes and attempts to improve leadership, management and governance are backed-up by a learning culture that continually reinforces a new 'can-do' spirit.
>
> " – Use methods of 'joined-up' working, management and leadership to replace the puppetry of scientific management and bureaucratic rationality and stimulate organizational learning..." (2003: 4)

It uses a penetrating analysis, often from a sociological perspective, of relevant literature to build a cohesive argument for many of the factors which underlie this research project on action learning. It offers helpful insight into what eventually became critical issues in the research:

> "... challenges to inner-directed thinking, implicit in learning-how-to-learn, are often deeply threatening and invariably evoke irrational and defensive responses or evasive action." (2003: 11)

The primary research underpinning the thesis also confirms that the action research project, in seeking to transform aspects of the institutional culture in which it is based, may be breaking new ground:

> "The responses...collectively confirmed the view that, despite all the participative structures that characterize most universities, there was no significant evidence, except in one notable instance, that they inspire very much real open dialogue, reflection, genuine participation or sharing other than at a superficial level." (2003: 18)

The bad news is that it is impossible to identify the "one notable instance", since the responses were anonymous.

An overview report by the LFHE suggests that the sector may be starting to move in a new direction. This is bullish in its assertions that leading change is one of the greatest challenges for leaders in higher education, pointing to some factors relevant to action learning:

> "Change by its very nature generates a lot of negative energy inside organisations, and the key skill is to work with the multitude of communities within an institution to turn that... into something that is positive and focused." (2005: 9)

Finally, a report on effective leadership in HE by Bryman (2007) - while making no mention whatever of action learning, coaching or mentoring as tools for organizational learning – uses a dual approach (of a literature review between 1985 and 2005, and of interviews with departmental and institutional leaders in the UK) to present findings of interest. These include two out of eleven facets of effective leadership which are relevant to action learning in the research project:

"- Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment
-Facilitating participation in decision-making" (2007: 2)

Significant to the institutional context of the project are seven factors "likely to cause damage" (2007: 3), all of which were arguably problematic in that they were behaviours exhibited by senior managers at the College.

Bryman highlights those aspects of leadership in HE which distinguish the sector from other occupational and professional fields to which leadership theory applies, in particular the role of the middle manager "in defending or protecting… staff, quite possibly in opposition to expectations among senior echelons" (2007: 3).

He is also critical of the existing literature which rarely examines the concept of effectiveness in leadership, but all too often describes approaches. A further weakness lies in the self-contained nature of the literature on HE leadership, with "relatively little cross-reference to wider leadership theory and research" (2007: 14), partially explaining this by "the low value many academics place on leadership and managerial positions" (2007: 16-17), and hence the irrelevance of the 'new leadership approach' with its emphasis on charismatic leadership.

Of particular interest to the research project is Bryman's identification of a gap between the emphasis in school leadership thinking on distributed leadership, and any take-up of this concept in higher education. A further critical weakness in the literature for Bryman is in its emphasis on "outcomes for employees rather than students" (2007: 17), and hence its overlooking of impact of

effective leadership on the student learning experience (which is relevant to some of the propositions under investigation in this thesis).

Action Learning and Organizational Leadership and Learning

It is clear that there is almost no published work in the UK which focuses on action learning specifically as a leadership tool in higher education. However, a range of output has been written concerning the use of action learning in settings where it has been used to develop organizations in other sectors, and this will be examined later in this section.

In addition to searching for literature in the domain of education, it is also important to examine closely the literature of management and of organizational development.

In terms of defining action learning and its use in a range of contexts, there are a number of helpful books. Revans, the acknowledged 'father figure' of action learning, provides the definitive guide to the process he invented, using his book to outline the characteristic assumptions underlying action learning, and providing a reminder that it addresses:

> "...the need to help managers – and all others who engage in it – [to acquire] this insight into the posing of questions by the simple device of setting them to tackle real problems that have so far defied solution" (1983: 11).

Revans originated the propositional 'formula' for action learning that: Learning (L) = Programmed knowledge (P) + Questioning (Q) + Reflection (R), and associated 'classic' principles, including the notion that action learning works best in sets of approximately six managers, each focused on a specific organizational work-based problem, and using the skills of an appointed facilitator whose role includes ensuring that questioning and reflection are used appropriately (rather than offering direct advice).

He provides a short history of some examples of the use of action learning programmes in the UK, in organizations ranging from engineering concerns such as GEC, through to public sector organizations such as the National Health Service and the former National Coal Board – which set up the earliest programme, in 1952 (1983: 56-58).

In the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of instances documented of action learning being used in a wide range of professional settings – due in part to the existence since 2004 of the journal *Action Learning: Research and Practice* – including private companies (Spencer [2005]), veterinary practice (Shuttleworth [2005]), policing (David [2006]), the health service (Boaden [2004]) and local politics (Foley [2006]).

Mumford's literature review of action learning provides a helpful overview, despite the rather irritating mentions of the author's own works and his speculation as to his own thinking and motivation. He highlights the limited extent to which articles and books have concentrated on the experience of ALS participants (1997: 375) or on the "learning process as distinct from task achievement or group process" (1997: 379). He describes the literature as "amazingly thin" (1997: 380) in terms of examination of how participants help each other to learn and to resolve problems. He also emphasizes the absence of much evaluative literature, or of a single instance of a failed action learning intervention (1997: 386-7). All these points are salient to the research project, as it pays attention to each of these aspects in examining its key propositions.

Pedler et al (2005) offer an update on the wider take-up of action learning as an organizational development approach since 1995, but ask:

> "...if the practice of action learning is growing in the companies and large organisations who are the primary clients of the business schools, why was there so little evidence that these schools are preparing themselves and their staffs for working in this way?" (2005: 50)

The same question also applies to managers in higher education, about which Michael Bichard, rector of the University of the Arts London, is quoted in an interview by Chambers as saying:

> "Leadership and management capability does not yet extend deep enough… I'm surprised that the sector doesn't have more of a culture of personal learning: coaching, mentoring, action learning sets. The demand for such experience seems to be limited – elsewhere they are recognized as crucial learning routes." (2005: 6)

Despite this comment on the HE sector, Pedler et al conclude that, more widely,

> "…action learning appears to have spread as an 'ethos' (general way of thinking about learning), as well as method (specific set of practices)" (2005: 57).

They report the development of six varieties of action learning "…today that are dilutions or evolutions" of Revans's 'classical principles'. One of these, also referred to by Zuber-Skeritt (2001) is Critical Action Learning, and is relevant to my research project in that it focuses on "learning about power, politics and struggle in the process" (2005: 59), as will be seen in the case study in Chapter 4. However, the fifth example, Self-Managed Action Learning (SMAL) is of most striking resemblance to the experience in the School of International Education. Identification of this variety is attributed to O'Hara et al (2004), and it is characterized by the lack of emphasis on

> "…the role of the facilitator, limiting it to that of providing initial advice and encouragement" (Pedler et al, 2005: 61)

The skills required by individual learners and the set as a whole are accorded greater importance. Pedler et al stress that this variety does not involve any dilution of Revans's principles:

> "…SMAL actually strengthens a key classical principle in challenging an often taken-for-granted aspect of current action learning practice" (2005: 61).

Here, the authors are referring to the growing dependence elsewhere on the expertise – and expense – of a hired 'expert' facilitator.

O'Hara et al emphasize the importance of the knowledge and skills required on the part of set members, rather than a facilitator. They offer the rationale that:

> "...the key question to ask of an innovation in practice is not whether it will work, but rather who can work the innovation? The answer to this question depends as much on the beliefs and values of the practitioners as it does on their technical capability" (2004: 29-30).

The knowledge and skills highlighted by O'Hara et al (2004: 36) map interestingly onto the identification by Revans of the 'formula' for action learning where L = P + Q + R. In this case, P (Programmed knowledge) relates to the following capabilities which arguably were strengths of the INTED staff, particularly of the academic members of staff:

- An understanding of group process
- Understanding the process of learning
- Active listening skills
- The ability to give and receive feedback
- Creative problem solving

At least the first four of these were the bread and butter of the course provision offered by the School of International Education. It will therefore be a core purpose of the analysis of data in the case study (Chapter 4) to identify the extent to which evidence of the application of these capacities emerged in the ALS sessions.

In terms of Revans's formula, Q (Questioning) clearly relates to what O'Hara et al define as "*Questioning skills* to help people to find their own solutions to their problems" (2004: 36), while R (Reflection) is described as:

> "*The skills of reflection* to plan for future action and to help derive the learning from action" (ibid.).

Harrison (2006) provides a rare examination of what happens in ALS settings where effective questioning is constrained by relatively low skill levels, such as those demonstrated by international students of management education, and offers practical suggestions on how such skills might be improved.

Pedler stresses that questioning involves "exercising moral imagination" (1997b: 34), and provides a strong reminder of the ethical and power dimensions which seem constantly present in action learning.

McGill and Beaty establish a context for using action learning in educational settings, referring specifically to their work at the University of Brighton. They discuss conceptual and practical issues, and consider ways in which action learning can be used as part of "the systems of management development" (1992: 228). They state that action learning sets are either initiated by or within an organization, or are independent. My project is clearly situated within an organization, although it is difficult to decide in which of the following categories it fits:

> "Two groups of people may initiate action learning within an organization. The first group are those who have responsibility for development and wish to use action learning as an important means of enabling staff and management development to happen. The second group are the people who wish to be participants in sets for their personal and management development." (1992: 95)

In the case of my School, both seemed to co-exist in the same action learning set, and in my motivations for establishing the project. This is examined further in the case study.

Beaty et al provide a useful article in which they offer insight into "what it means to become a more effective set member" (1993: 350), although their article has little validity in critical terms, offering barely more than a practical guide. This article was useful, in the event, in helping to prepare set members for the first meeting of the Action Learning Set.

Hoban and Erickson (2004) identify action learning more closely with professional development in business rather than education (where they feel teacher Action Research is more the norm), although they fail to consider why there is no greater crossover between approaches used for professional development in the separate fields of business, medicine and education, or what the implications of such crossover would be.

Rothwell (1999) provides a rather under-theorized manual aimed at an audience of human resource directors who might consider applying action learning within their own organizations. The book provides a high number of project management framework tools which appear to detract from the exploratory, emancipatory nature of action learning, and imply – possibly in ways which are true to Revans's original ideas – that achievement of pre-determined organizational goals is paramount. There is an assumption in the work that action learning is a training approach. Nevertheless, there are some strong, practical examples of 'creativity-enhancing techniques' (1999: 92-94) and of problem-solving methods (1999: 88-91).

Having made some preliminary investigations into the Reg Revans library collection in Salford, I discovered that what exists there comprises a set of materials which were compiled by a dedicated administrative assistant during the course of Revans's life until his death in his mid-nineties in 2003. The impression given by the information available online – a series of word documents which are not interconnected, and require separate searches to locate and enter – is of a rather chaotic, only partially-categorised collection which would have taken considerable time and patience to analyse. I reached the conclusion that this would be of little added value to a researcher whose subject

is not directly related to the life and thoughts of Revans himself. I was not seeking, after all, to be what Pedler et al would describe as a 'Guardian' in respect of action learning, "...seeking to uphold Revans's Classical Principles in the face of various dilutions, departures and deviations" (2005: 64), but rather a 'Trader', "exploring variations, learning from them and modifying our practice accordingly" (ibid.).

The materials include an archive of biographical material (including birthday cards, hand-written index file notes and mementos), folders of articles classified variously as being written by 'Supportive Disciples', 'Allied Thinkers', etc., and texts for unpublished books (most of which apparently had no intending publisher). There is more than a hint of an 'evangelical' approach to the collection.

Nevertheless, investigating the Revans legacy at the University of Salford sparked further interest in a paper by Brook et al (2004). I was interested in research carried out at the Revans Institute for Action Learning and Research since 2002,

> "enquiring into the growth and variety of action learning practice and its implications for leadership and management development" (Brook et al, 2004:1).

The research questions included those drawing a distinction between the 'classical principles' of Action Learning and the ways these have been interpreted and adjusted over time. This concern is echoed by a number of other recent writers on the application of Action Learning in higher education, and highlights the fact that in practice, participation in ALS groups in some contexts is far from voluntary in nature.

There are interesting findings, reported in the paper, that:

> "action learning neither appeals to the traditional scholars (experts, disciplinarians) or to radicals, except in the critical action learning mode." (ibid.)

Ballantine (2003) argues for a re-appraisal of Action Learning, and considers it – in the wake of Revans's death – alongside other parallel developments in the domain of change management. He provides a useful distinction between Action Learning and action research, both of which aim at improved performance. Differentiation lies in the fact that Action Learning has learning within the set as its secondary outcome, whereas action research is concerned rather with "theoretical development of an understanding of situations which the present situation typifies" (Ballantine, 2003: 4). This is helpful to me in clarifying the multiple outcomes of my work, which are presented diagrammatically in Fig. 2.3 later in this Chapter.

Ballantine takes the realistic view that Action Learning "has never truly entered the mainstream of developmental methods" (2003: 8), and provides an explanation that its rejection is due to its lack of orthodoxy. He cites the fact that theory emerges from experience, rather than being learnt before attempting such experience, as a perceived weakness, yet fails to substantiate this point by providing evidence from supposed critics.

In commenting on the work of others who worked in the National Coal Board at the same time as Revans – notably Vickers, who was Revans's line manager – Ballantine offers some fresh thinking on the concept of the double loop learning cycle, which is considered elsewhere in the literature review. In relation to the idea of action, the loop is double in the sense of:

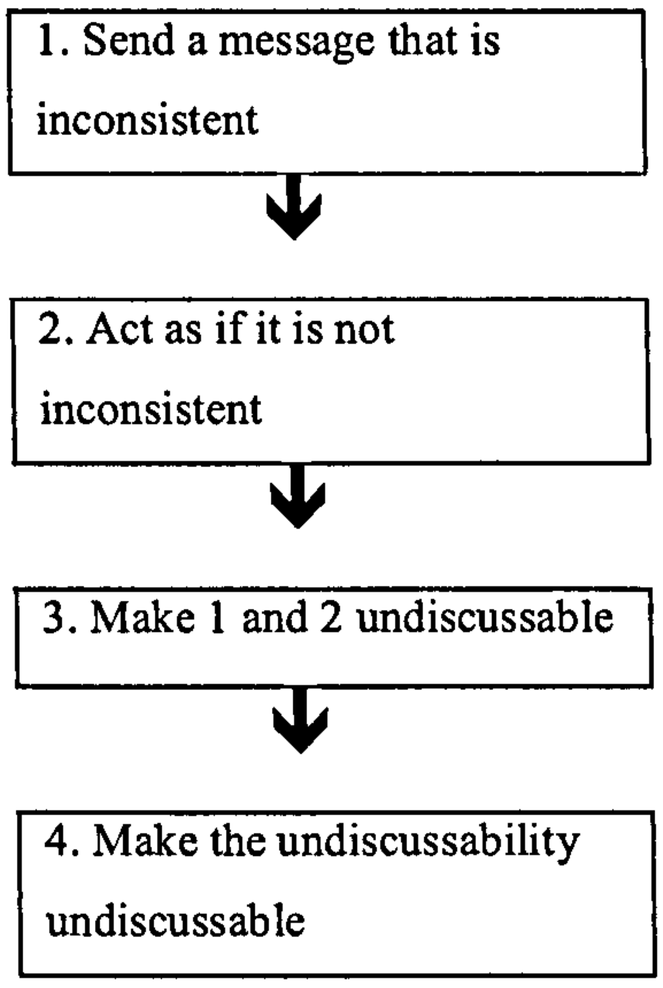
- Action to enable understanding of the current operating situation and clarify values
- Action to change the situation

(Ballantine, 2003: 12).

Ballantine revisits the double loop concept in light of work by Argyris and Schoen, pointing out the one-dimensionality of theory in use when it is disconnected from espoused theory (2003: 13). He also exemplifies managers' behaviour when they display a mismatch between the two, stating that:

> "people develop emotional defence mechanisms to protect themselves against the incongruity involved in this" (ibid.).

This in itself is illuminating in terms of the reported behaviours of some senior managers in higher education, and is characterised, after Argyris (1999: 58-59), as:



Furthermore, Ballantine points out that in single-loop learning, performance improvement results from using externally-set standards, whereas double-loop learning involves redefining the standards themselves (ibid.). The findings of the ALS in this research project, as reported in the case study, provide several examples of adjusting the parameters within which the Set and the wider department (INTED) operated – such as the decision in one session to turn the planned June 2006 Awayday event into a simulation of the School three years into the future.

The analysis by Rooke and Torbert of seven 'action logics' of leadership, throws further light on double-loop learning (though they do not use the term as such):

> "The developing Individualist…begins to enquire about and reflect on the goals themselves – with the aim of improving future goals" (2005: 9).

At a higher order of leadership development (moving towards the Strategist logic), the authors suggest that by applying collaborative inquiry, strategic leaders can experience "this ongoing practice of reframing inquiry that makes them and their corporations so successful" (2005: 9). Such a level was arguably never reached in the case of the INTED ALS.

Braddick and Casey (1996) reflect on a singular experience, in a long career of set facilitation, in which they noted little action focus, but considerable reflection by set members on their life, success and families.

The reason for this was that the participants were all managing directors of big companies, who took advantage of the ALS format to "reframe many problems about their aims and ambitions" (1996: 234).

The writers conclude that a different, more reflective type of learning occurred to that in sets with more junior participants who were concerned with their projects rather than themselves as individuals.

They also noted that as the set progressed through its sequence of meetings, there was "...a gradual shift up the hierarchy from the largely cognitive activity of reporting, to the largely emotional activity of offering support/ exerting pressure" (1996: 237). This observation is worth examining in the case study in terms of the experience of the ALS in INTED.

Of particular interest is the model of two polarities of ALS which they evolved from their observation, as shown in Figure 2.2 below.

ACTION SET	→	REFLECTIVE SET
-Task orientated		-Personal development orientated
-Driven to achieve project		-Driven to reflect on life
-Set adviser's role clear		- Set adviser's role unclear
Relatively junior, younger participants	→	*Relatively senior, older participants*

Fig. 2.2 Model for types of action learning sets
[after Braddick and Casey (1996)]

One interesting finding from my work is that the ALS in INTED comprised a mix of more junior and senior members (and a spread of ages from 37 to 57), and its practice was about halfway between the two extremes suggested on the linear scale in Fig. 2.2. Interestingly, two of the three oldest members (P1 and P4) were the two who most frequently stated that they did not feel they had projects as such, but placed particular value on reflection.

Action Learning in Higher Education

A number of papers from the last four or five years document what appears to be an increase in take-up of Action Learning by higher education institutions. In practice, this amounts either to a broadly-interpreted version of Action Learning used in student programmes of learning (of which the University of Brighton has been a leading exponent), or to initiatives in which Action Learning Sets are used on leadership and management development programmes within institutions (Bournemouth, Birkbeck) or across institutions as in the case of the Top Management Programme (Castley and Steel, 2002).

In terms of student learning, Lizzio and Wilson (2004) compare the effect of action learning and more conventional teaching interventions in developing the professional capabilities of students in Australia. Other authors identify collaborative learning (Cox, 1999) and action learning (Beaty, 1999) as means to enable academic staff to work in teams in order to improve teaching and learning. However, almost no attention in paid to learning processes, or to the participants' experiences, in either of these sources, and this limits their usefulness to practitioners.

In the work of Bourner and Lawson (2000), Bourner and Frost (1996) and Bourner et al (1996, 1997), there is evidence of richly-integrated work in Action Learning across the University of Brighton and in other institutions, particularly in the 'halcyon days' of action learning in the mid-1990s. This spanned undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and also impacted on staff development experiences, particularly induction for new lecturers in learning and teaching pedagogies. Although they report on a familiar gamut of claimed benefits for Action Learning, the authors are also honest in identifying drawbacks and in evaluating what they consider to be their own mistakes. The authors are particularly open in describing their own shortcomings in the context of the work they carried out from 1996 in order to establish "the limitations and boundaries of the domains of applicability of action learning" (2000: 4). Among these are the failure

> "...to identify an agenda for research into action learning... as a learning process in higher education" (2000: 8).

This provides an opportunity for this thesis, at least in the narrower context of action learning as a learning process in *leadership* in higher education.

The authors highlight a point which must surely necessitate some soul-searching within all action learning practitioners:

> "We could have been more effective guardians of the spirit of action learning within our institution. Where we have seen the

> dilution of action learning, we have tended to turn a blind eye to focus on our own current interests." (2000: 9)

By this, one might assume that they are referring to whether or not the key tenet of voluntary participation was adhered to – it is clear that this was not the case.

One final finding, which sheds light on the apparent ease with which the INTED ALS members were able to facilitate the work of the Set, is that:

> "[self-facilitation] depends on whether or not the set happens to contain members with skills in group facilitation…If all the set members were highly-skilled set participants then on-going set facilitation would be unnecessary" (2000: 5).

It should be noted, however, that at no stage in Bourner and Lawson's work is there any mention of action learning as a leadership tool at the University of Brighton.

Use of action learning in postgraduate degrees (particularly those focused on management education) has been recognized in recent years (Bourner and Simpson, 2005; Coghlan and Pedler, 2006), with frameworks proposed for the design and evaluation of dissertations and theses which result from such work. These are considered in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Where claims are made for action learning in facilitating leadership development, these are usually in the settings of 'compulsory' ALS experiences as part of training programmes, such as HESDA/LFHE's Top Management Programme, or Bournemouth University's Leadership Programme. Castley and Steel (2002) offer a rather bland and descriptive account of senior management development on the former programme, without considering any of the wider implications for the day-to-day business of leadership in universities. The Action Learning Set appears to have become a standard expectation within the Top Management Programme – and one which participants seem very largely to find helpful and rewarding – but it seems to be left there, in the programme,

and rarely (if ever) applied to senior management activity within their own institutions.

Castley and Steel's assertion, incidentally, that "a minimum of four presenters... is necessary to make meetings effective" was not borne out by our experience (in which all but one of the six Set meetings had fewer than four presenters).

One rare example of discussion of the extent to which action learning contributes to organizational learning in higher education can be found in work by Passfield (2002). He attributes the success of an institution-wide programme of action learning for senior academic and administrative staff of the University of Queensland in the 1990s to the concept of its being a 'parallel learning structure', since it co-existed alongside formal notions of hierarchical leadership.

A paper by Evans (2003) highlights experience of four different sets facilitated during 2002-3 at Birkbeck College by the staff development team. Evans defines various sub-groupings within institutional life, and makes a case for action learning as a means to increase cross-boundary understanding within institutions, but concludes:

> "All these sub-groups can be reduced to two: Administration and Academics...What is frequently called a 'communication problem' usually comes down to the differences (in culture, power, values, working patterns?) between these two tribes." (2003: 2)

It is pleasing to note that the ALS in the project spanned this perceived divide, and the findings attest to the success of the attempt to integrate members. In Evans's case, however, he admits to not having been able to bring the two 'tribes' together, noting ruefully that:

> "Noticeably absent from these groups are academic managers" (2003: 3).

Evans provides an alluring argument for extending the use of action learning sets across academic departmental boundaries (in a way which would have been particularly pertinent during the extended review process of INTED):

> "Enabling members of one sub-group of an organization to better understand the other sub-groups: an alternative to idealizing or (more usually) scapegoating them. As this understanding is passed on, as more members of a unit have had this experience, it means the organization learns to know itself better at all levels. This wide-spread knowledge of the bigger picture is one of the core features of a well-managed organization." (2003: 1)

In one final example from HE, Whetherly (2004) is rare in claiming specific benefits for action learning in developing and supporting women, in a brief paper based on participants' experiences of ALS in four UK universities.

Identifying the Research Propositions

It is important to locate within this Chapter the propositions which are investigated in the thematic analysis in Chapter 4, since these propositions arise directly from the theory, as follows. Many of the propositions are based on the precepts of cultural social constructivism, in which learning occurs in a social context which involves scaffolding, in the case of action learning, by the set members and facilitator.

Proposition 1 is that action learning enables practitioners in higher education to change their practices.

McGill and Beaty argue passionately, and in some depth, for the effects of action learning on the practice of professionals (1995: 209-235) and of managers (1995: 198-209), attributing this in large part to the collaborative and reflective learning which action learning entails.

Specifically, they describe five

> "...developmental benefits [from action learning] which contribute to a manager's capacity to learn, develop and change by participating in a set" (1995: 229).

Proposition 2 is that there is intrinsic value in action learning in terms of team-working and affective factors.

Weinstein's empirical research on the action learning experience of 69 individuals in sixteen different contexts is arguably unique in the opportunities it offers to test a number of propositional claims for the benefits of action learning, including those relating to the development of individuals.

Weinstein's criteria for a set which is working well (1995: 61-2) map onto evidence, presented in the 'discourse interventions' used by ALS participants (see Chapter 4). Reading Weinstein has enabled me to define theorized behavioural factors to look for in evaluating the Set's success. These involved attempting to find evidence of the following:

- Support group role of the Set
- The Set gelling
- Increased self-confidence
- Valuing others
- Taking responsibility
- Honesty and openness
- Disciplined approaches to working in the Set

There is a key finding in Castley and Steel which concur with this proposition, namely that: all set participants

> "...need to feel nurtured and the action learning sets...
> provide professional support in ways that other forms of
> development intervention can rarely achieve" (2002:4).

Passfield claims benefits for action learning in terms of "increased capacity to collaborate, as well as improved working relationships" (2002: 155). These are tested in the case study in Chapter 4. Senge explores in some depth the reasons why team learning is important, identifying teams as "the key learning unit in organizations" (1990: 236). He raises a further research need which does not yet seem to have been investigated in the field of higher education management: to develop "theory of what happens when teams learn (as opposed to individuals in teams learning)" (1990: 238).

Proposition 3 is that skills developed through action learning are transferable more widely across participants' lives.

Weinstein's relating (1995: 55-60) of her thinking to that of Revans and of Honey and Mumford (as the originators of learning styles and learning behaviours) helped me to identify a range of factors to incorporate into individual interviews with ALS participants, including:

- How the ALS helped participants to develop their own learning
- Relationships between perceived self-development and actions at work
- 'Transferable skills' which emerged from the ALS experience (networking, interpersonal communication, self-awareness, readiness to take responsibility and initiative)

Proposition 4 is that key learning takes place in an action learning set at points in participants' experience when the group has not yet become an established set.

In exploring the work of Wenger on communities of practice, Ballantine (2003) perhaps unintentionally highlights a weakness in that awareness of Revans's thinking has never really reached the USA. Wenger's four components of learning (1998) provide helpful ways of approaching analysis of the individual post-ALS interviews with participants, covering: becoming a community member, developing practical competence as a member, gaining meaning from the experience, and developing a sense of personal identity (Ballantine, 2003: 14). A key assertion to test in the analysis is Ballantine's statement that:

> "the key learning takes place when [participants] are at the stage of being recognised as having started on the route to 'membership' but have not yet achieved it" (ibid.).

Proposition 5 is that action learning enables distributed leadership within self-defined professional learning communities.

Both as researcher and formal leader of the School, the 'project' which was my own focus of learning and action in the ALS was focused specifically on creating a "professional learning community" (NCSL, 2006: 4) in the School, in order to "promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the... community with the collective purpose of enhancing [student] learning" (ibid.). I perceived myself to be a facilitative leader, committed to the concept of distributed leadership (NCSL, 2005).

According to NCSL (2006: 5-6), a professional learning community is characterized by reflective professional enquiry, collaboration focused on learning, and collective responsibility for students' learning. As such, the ALS offered a potentially powerful vehicle for developing, and for investigating signs of emergence over time, of such a community.

Proposition 6 is that action learning changes power relationships in the learning situation. McGill and Brockbank assert:

> "the creativity of the group may remain leashed because the group is inhibited by the line authority of the team leader as manager who is exercising their authority to the detriment of the group for fear of losing authority." (2004: 265)

The effect of the power relationship of the line manager is examined later, in Chapter 4.

Ballantine also feels that Action Learning may be treated with some suspicion because it:

> "in effect, changes the power relationships in the learning situation. Neither the set advisor nor the employing organisation are wholly in charge." (2003: 9).

This may argue for at least partial mitigation of the distorting effect of my initiation of the ALS as line manager to all other participants.

More positively, McGill and Beaty claim that:

> "Action learning is a process which encourages personal responsibility for learning and the development of skills in constructing personal knowledge. It supports the development from voicelessness to personal power in the construction of knowledge." (1995: 181)

Proposition 7 is that action learning is unlikely, if practiced in an isolated sub-culture, to have more than a limited impact on the culture of an HEI as a whole; indeed, it may conflict with institutional systems and structures.

There is a need to take account of the drawbacks which were reported by some of Weinstein's interviewees (1995: 285-9), all of which apply potentially to my

research context. Among these were the limited impact made on the culture of the organization as a whole, the lack of follow-up activity, and potential for conflict with hierarchical systems and structures elsewhere in the organization.

Other potential drawbacks include:

- The personal development of individuals leading to their own promotion rather than achievement of their projects
- Dependence on the initiative of small numbers of enthusiasts, reducing likelihood of sustainability
- Lack of internal political support by conservative senior managers
- Self-selecting factionalization resulting from the cliqueishness of AL converts
- Deterrent effect of the cost to organizations of initial investment in skills development

(from Bourner and Lawson, 2000)

Each of these factors provides a potential filter to apply when analysing the data from the ALS in this project.

Proposition 8 is that action learning can work across hierarchical levels in an organization, given appropriate circumstances of organizational culture. This is supported by Castley and Steel, who see benefits in multi-level working:

> "the broader the range of skills, experience and personalities, the greater the opportunity to challenge particular perspectives – which may be limiting a manager's effectiveness" (2002: 4).

Conclusion

This Chapter has attempted to identify the areas of literature which need to inform the research project, beginning with the broad context of management, leadership and organization, and continuing in more detail into the literature specifically relating to higher education. Finally, in the area which still requires the greatest amount of further research, I have attempted to grapple with the issues which refer to the application of action research to organizational development. In revealing the gaps in the literature in this final area, it has become apparent that the research project addresses some of the knowledge which is as yet absent from the field of research in higher education leadership and management.

CHAPTER 3. Methodological Approach

In order to put forward detailed and relevant methodological questions which inform the empirical study, it is necessary at this stage to define the theoretical context in which it is situated. In doing so, it is equally important to establish clear definitions of key concepts which underpin the study, and to employ these in providing a rationale for my proposed methodological approach.

After outlining a framework for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data, I will consider questions which relate to dealing with the implications of the research findings, to ethical issues and to evaluation of the study. The final part of this Chapter will address personal, institutional and ethical issues, and consider related concerns about reflexivity.

At the outset, I wish to make clear that what could be said to be an eclectic approach to data collection and analysis (i.e. using a blend of action research and case study) is nonetheless employed within a clearly constructivist framework, as argued later in this Chapter.

Key Definitions underpinning the Research

The project is clearly a piece of *action research* in that it matches Cohen and Manion's definition of a "small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention" (1994: 186). It generates critical discourse as an outcome of working with other practitioners, enabling ideas to be "teased out, analysed, criticized, debated" (Phillips, 1989: 66). Furthermore, it can enable practitioners to shape "educational practices and situations" (Kemmis, 1988: 181).

It uses *action learning* as the subject of its investigation. This was selected as a vehicle for changing the culture of the department in which it was based. In this capacity, McGill and Beaty suggest that "it is primarily an aid to learning" (1995: 24).

The project relates its research activity and presents its findings by means of a two-part *case study*. Bassey (1999) refuses to offer a single definition of case study, reporting the wide range of interpretations available in the literature of educational research. Taking this further, into the identification of types of case study, I intend firstly to use 'story-telling' case study to record what happened in the ALS in my department. Secondly, I propose to interpret my findings through writing an evaluative second section of the case study, in which thematic analysis is presented in relation to the eight research propositions identified at the end of Chapter 2.

It is also important for me to understand clearly my role as a *participant researcher*. My research role goes beyond that of participant observation defined by Burgess (1984a: 79), because the process of establishing action learning sets is a deliberate intervention, thus creating an artificial situation. This is further complicated by my role as line manager to the members of the ALS. Attention is therefore given to ensuring internal validity so that the influence of the researcher is not seen to skew the investigation. The concept of triangulation is built into the project so as to demonstrate "trustworthy procedures" (Bassey, 1999: 40).

The Project as Action Research

Two texts have been particularly influential in helping me to locate my work in the field of educational research. Bassey (1999: 39) provides a helpful framework for distinguishing "the kind of research which is carried out by educationists" from the non action-related, phenomenological work carried out by sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists. Within educationists' work is situated empirical research, "which focuses primarily on data collection" (1999: 40). Bassey identifies three categories of empirical research, including action research, which is undertaken "in order to understand, evaluate and change" (1999: 40). This is clearly what drives my proposed research – not purely a desire to understand from a theory-seeking or theory-testing

perspective, nor applying solely a clear-cut evaluative perspective. Instead, my work is a practitioner-led study of singularity, operating within an interpretive research paradigm.

It adopts a constructivist stance in that it puts forward new understandings of action learning which are based on the researcher's developing knowledge of the eight research propositions in light of his own, and his participants', experience.

Action learning involves creating an interactive environment for the construction of understanding, and is supportive of experimentation and the discovery of broad principles. In using action learning, participants build their own understanding of how to be self-supporting, reflective and action-oriented in applying learning to their own practice.

As field research, it is important to establish whether or not the study adopts a grounded theory approach. Burgess (1984a) is helpful in illuminating such issues. He makes clear that substantive grounded theory ("generating theories from data") can be useful in informing fields such as professional development (1984a: 180). However, he also emphasizes that a grounded theory approach is one which is primarily about theory-building, not theory-testing, and this leads me to the conclusion that it conflicts conceptually with the notions underlying action research.

Burgess is equivocal in his support for grounded theory as advocated by Glaser and Strauss, citing the work of researchers who have pointed to the flaws and confusion which they see in the "*tabula rasa* view of inquiry" (1984a: 181). Points against grounded theory include the futility of seeking 'distance' to enable theory to emerge, the impossibility of entering a research setting without foreknowledge, and the repressive nature of procedures for 'neutralizing' data-gathering (Thomas and James, 2006: 781-3).

Bourner and Simpson, in considering the epistemologies of practitioner-centred research in the context of action learning-based theses, categorize 'knowing' in four ways, the third of which (empiricism) is the basis for grounded theory. They feel that social scientists, in their reliance on grounded theory and its application of reason to "'sense-based data'" (2005: 136), fail to take into account "the challenge for the university now… to apply reason to…knowledge gained through introspection" (ibid.). This represents for me an opportunity to attempt introspection without necessarily rejecting grounded theory in the process.

Zuber-Skerritt is helpful in her ability to place grounded theory together with emancipatory theory and critical theory in a set of three overlapping circles in which action learning occupies the central territory. She feels that grounded theory provides useful principles to support the "developmental processes from technical to critical inquiry" (2001: 9), and advocates the potential in an ALS for every participant "being a 'personal scientist'" (2001: 15). This supports the constructivist stance in my work.

In Bassey's framework, action research is seen as leading to the production of "outcomes as interpretations" (1999: 4) and, more concretely, of stories. However, he also puts forward an argument for the use of case studies within action research, and states that case studies can lead to generation both of outcomes as interpretations and also as predictions. In this latter sense, it is possible to produce what Bassey calls "fuzzy generalizations" (1999: 4) from comparative analysis of case studies - leading to indicative predictions of what *may* happen in *similar* situations if *similar* actions are applied. I intend to make such generalizations, as explored later in the thesis.

Action Research in relation to Action Learning

A review of trends in recent literature of action research by Dick (2006) reveals that there is growing evidence of action research being linked to 'teacher

leadership' (2006: 441), though this is clearly not specifically contextualised in higher education.

Action Learning is mentioned not in the section on educational action research - "the busiest area of....publication" (2006: 441) - but rather unsurprisingly in the category on organizational applications, where he notes that:

> "Action learning and action research continue to grow closer together" (2006: 446).

Dick also cites an example of work about doctoral students researching their management practice using action research.

A recent article by Dehler and Edmonds (2006) provides a succinct summary of action research frameworks which they have used to incorporate action research into the student learning experience on postgraduate management education programmes. These refer to three schools identified by Marsick and O'Neil (1999): "scientific, experiential and critical reflection", and to three paradigms after McNiff (2000): "empirical, interpretive, and critical theoretic" (Dehler and Edwards, 2006: 641).

Raelin and Coghlan (2006) present action learning and action research as two alternative approaches for management development, and use a novel framework to compare them, of Form, Voice, Level and Time.

In this analysis, action research is seen respectively as being based mainly on dialectical knowledge, using a third-person voice, involving triple-loop learning, and being concerned with the relationship between present and future practice.

By contrast, action learning is primarily about practical knowledge, using a second-person voice, applying double-loop learning and located in the here and now (2006: 682).

These distinctions, and the inter-relationships between action learning and action research, might be represented schematically as follows:

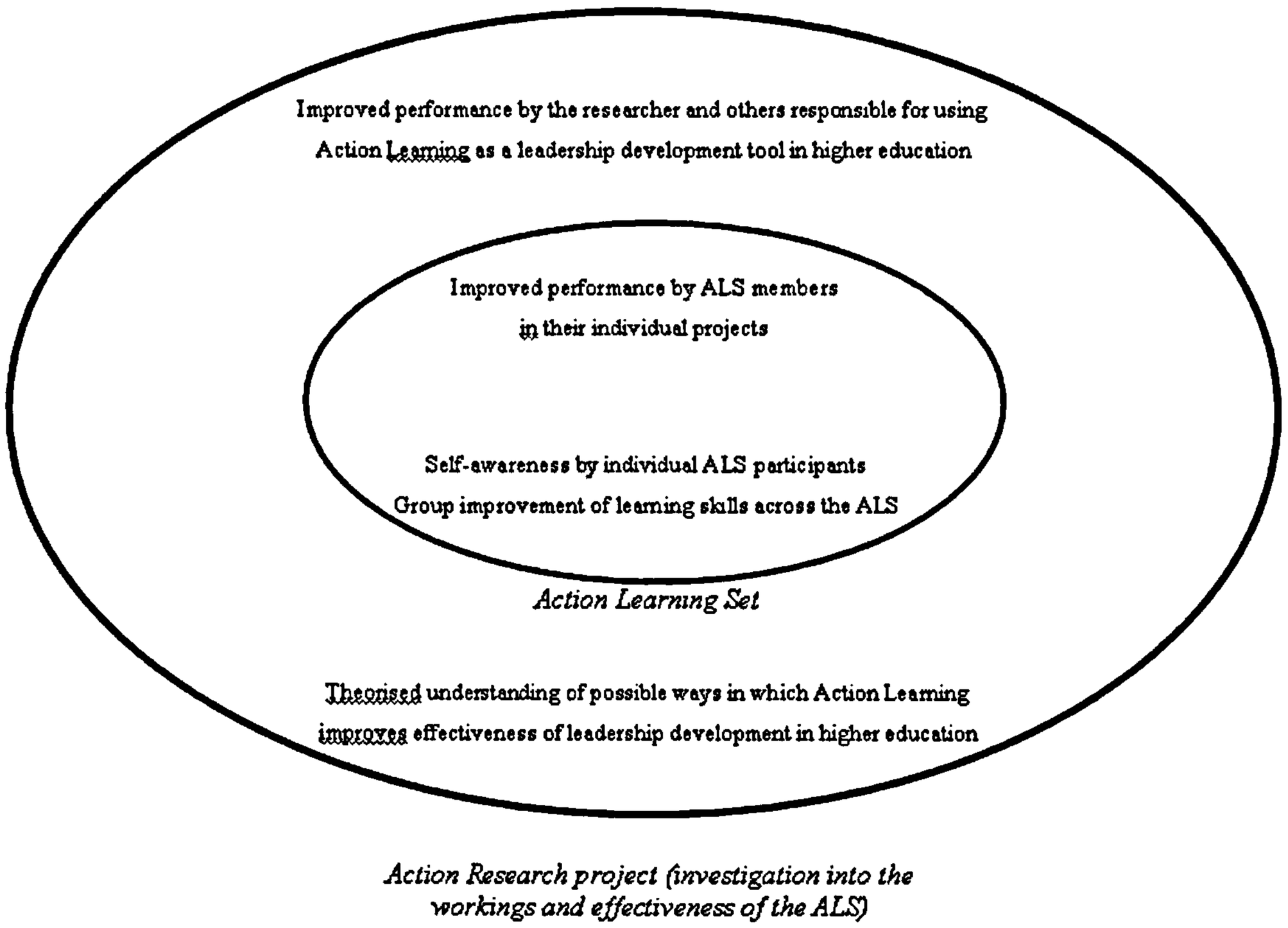


Fig. 2.3 Outcomes of the ALS action research project in relation to the field of leadership development in higher education

Methodology of Field Work and Case Study

The aim of this next section is to produce a clear statement on the methodological concepts and techniques implicit in using case study, and to be confident as to the location occupied by the case study in Chapter 4 on the scale between the 'scientific' at one extreme, and the 'fictional/imaginative' at the other.

It is clear from the amount of cross-referencing between the different sources consulted that there is a cumulative body of knowledge on case study in the social sciences which has developed over the past fifty or sixty years, and this

has been through various stages of being regarded as ground-breaking, frivolous, questionable, and essential to the generation of new theory (Yin [1989], Bailey [1996], Bassey [1999], Gillham [2000]).

Before considering the specific applicability of case study approaches to educational research, it is worth broaching more generic epistemological and pragmatic issues which are identified in the literature.

At the early stages of design of my research project, I was uncertain as to an exact rationale for choosing case study over experimental or survey approaches to my work with action learning sets in my higher education context. Having consulted my field notes and research log, I realised that this uncertainty stemmed from a concern over the justifiability of the approaches which felt instinctively right – but which I suspected might be exposed as lacking in scientific soundness. Further reading of the literature proved both informative and supportive, and enabled me to develop confidence in my constructivist stance.

The purpose of the research, as evinced by the research questions stated at the outset, is clearly to go far beyond the descriptive in order to investigate how understandings about organizational culture and climate are constructed socially by participants in such a culture. In this case, the context is of a specific intervention intended to strengthen the quality of professional dialogue in the academic unit where it is situated. Further, the research aims to offer explanations (*why*) which may add to theoretical knowledge, and is therefore not exclusively exploratory in its nature.

Yin offers some reassurance as to any insecurity I may have felt over generalisability, pointing out that:

> "Case studies… are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (1989: 21).

He sets out a challenge for researchers, identifying the weakness of case study research in having failed sufficiently to link "data to propositions… and criteria for interpreting the findings" (1989: 32). This represents both a warning and an opportunity for my project.

Research Design

Bassey devotes considerable intellectual effort to his arguments for a reconstruction of the concept of case study, but seems at times to contradict himself. At the start of his book, he contrasts the 'theory-seeking and theory-testing case study' (stating this to be his main focus) with alternative types such as story-telling, picture-drawing or evaluative case studies (1999: 3). He makes an appealing case for the former as "fuzzy generalization [arising] from studies of singularities" (1999: 12), and gives a clear example of a theory-seeking case study which investigates the extent to which two 'fuzzy propositions' were supported by a specific educational enquiry.

Later, Bassey implies that theory-seeking/testing and story-telling case studies are mutually exclusive (1999: 62). However, in stating his views on action research – "enquiry carried out in order to understand, evaluate and analyse" (1999: 40) - which he helpfully points out is neither simply theoretical nor evaluative, he blends the two. He says that action research lends itself well to story-telling in how it is recorded, and to theory-seeking and theory-testing as it is written-up. This seems to me to hold true for my work, and may reflect the heuristic process which Bassey undergoes during the course of his book.

Bassey seems at his most helpful when providing his checklist of criteria for an educational case study (1999: 20-21), and in including an example of a story-telling case study which demonstrates in practice what he advocates in theory in the main body of the book (1999: 95-115). This investigation, of the Nottinghamshire Staff Development Project in the 1980s, sets a precedent for case studies set against turbulent managerial backgrounds such as that in my

own institution, and provides a distinct chapter in the canon into which I am entering.

Bassey is also useful in forcing careful thought as to the theoretical bases for my work. It is theory-testing in that it investigates the propositions advocated by Revans, Senge and others in relation to the respective effects of action learning and professional dialogue within organizational learning. It is theory-seeking in its attempts to produce fuzzy generalizations which might illuminate approaches to strategic leadership in the change-oriented higher education sector. It clearly fits within the interpretive paradigm, and lends itself both to Stake's 'naturalistic generalizations' (which can be made personally by the reader) and 'propositional generalizations' or assertions made publicly by the researcher (1995).

Bailey provides a continuum for defining participant observation in field research which enables me to identify my own position, as a 'complete participant', rather than 'observer as participant' (1996: 10). This is considered further in the section on 'Reflexivity' below.

Yin offers further confirmation of the appropriateness of my approach for the research project, by defining three key characteristics of the case study as an empirical enquiry which:

> "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (1989: 23).

In this case, four sources of evidence are used: transcripts of the sequence of ALS meetings, supporting researcher notes, interviews with individual participants at the end of the sequence, and a short questionnaire on departmental culture eliciting the views of members of the School of International Education, including those who were not involved in the ALS. This last idea was inspired by Gillham (2000) who, while acknowledging an

intellectual debt to Yin, offers a range of practical suggestions to improve the research process.

Preparation for Data Collection

Many of the writers consulted emphasize the importance of regarding the phases of work on field research not as strictly chronological, but more as holistic. There is a common view that writing must not begin after note-taking and analysis, but that it is a continuous process, and begins in the design and preparatory stages. The structure of the Doctorate in Education clearly supports similar notions, unlike that of some other research degrees.

Bailey advocates several parallel categories for organizing field notes: chronological, details previously forgotten, analytic ideas and inferences (emerging themes constantly related to the research goals), impressions and feelings, and notes on "things to think about and do" (1996: 84). She suggests working in three-hour blocks to aid concentration, stressing the tedious and difficult nature of the task.

Gillham reinforces the challenge of the work, exhorting "*daily* and *exact* transcription onto a word processor" (2000: 24), and suggests the production of periodic summaries in order to prevent the material 'losing shape'. Such summaries should record and justify decisions taken, and comment on self-awareness of prejudices and preferences which emerge during the course of note-taking. He is even more exacting in his call for the researcher to seek out discrepant data, and to ask what people are *not* saying in the views they put forward (2000: 29), whilst acknowledging the difficulty of being reflective. This does suggest the need for early practice, and that the preparation stage is where the researcher should begin to seek mastery.

Another practical consideration proposed by Gillham is that of planning for interviews by being clear in advance as to which prompts and probes to use in order to "ensure that all the interviews have comparable coverage" (2000: 66-

67). He suggests that advance preparation should include devising transcription and analysis grids in which responses can be categorized question by question. He also suggests that, during the interview, the researcher allow participants to address the question 'How would discussions have been different if I hadn't been there?' This is salient to my project, given constant concern over the potentially distorting effect of the power dimension in my relationship to participants.

Yin is encouraging in his view that case study may be the most appropriate method for "appreciating the complexity of organizational phenomena" (1989: 12), and such complexity should be allowed for in preparation. The unpredictable interference of real-world events calls for flexibility on the part of the researcher, who does not control the data collection environment (Yin, 1989: 73) in which "practices... are... always changing" (Bassey, 1999: 35). This is certainly true of the institutional context in a national policy environment of unprecedented change. Nevertheless, the precise format of the action learning set procedure provides natural boundaries within which the environment of the research is defined, and this is a helpful mitigating circumstance.

Collection of Data

Yin's thoroughness in considering the importance of drawing on multiple sources, and constructing databases for storage and retrieval, leads to further reflection. His categorization of six source types has suggested a wider range of evidence than I had originally identified. Although evidence in the form of physical artifacts, archival records and from direct observation is not directly relevant, the other three categories are crucial, namely:

Documents: Sources include institutional documents, particularly those concerning educational vision and mission, and strategy in relation to leadership; consideration of appraisal notes for learning set participants was also worthwhile.

Interviews: Yin provides a rationale by which these are essential:

> "...because most case studies are about human affairs... and... respondents can provide important insights into a situation" (1989: 90-91).

Participant observation: Although Yin is cautious about the risk of bias from the researcher's participant role requiring "too much attention relative to the observer role" (1989: 97), the use of transcribed recordings may offset such risk. Another offsetting factor may be that data-collection (and subsequent reflection on it) is not at all inimical to the philosophy and operational reality of action learning, thus reducing the intrusiveness of the participant-observer. Furthermore, as Yin states, "opportunities arise because of the investigator's ability to manipulate events or situations" (1989: 93) and this can be construed positively.

As Gillham says of participant interviewees, they can be categorised, with some seen as being more 'elite' than others, in that they are

> "people who are capable of giving answers with insight and a comprehensive grasp of what it is you are researching... you will usually report [these interviews] more fully in your write-up" (2000: 63-4).

This is certainly true of more than one set member, whose active research and practice in academic pedagogic thinking clearly contribute a heightened sense of self-awareness to the sets, as shown by the transcripts of set meetings.

Recording and Analysing Evidence

All the writers consulted have much to say about this aspect of field work, and all give food for thought. Burgess advises on indexing field notes so as to allow for complexity, suggesting the use of multiple copies (for different categories of analysis) and wide margins (1984a: 174). This indicates that the five categories of initial analysis of comments used for the transcripts of the first two set meetings, and outlined in Chapter 4, was too simplistic to cope with the large

amounts of data collected, even in a single time-bound case. My perspective is an interactionist one, which:

> "...results in a set of questions that focus on the *meanings* individuals attach to social situations" (1984a: 212).

Burgess cites an example of teacher-pupil interaction analysis in which eight categories were devised, including domination, negotiation, and morale-boosting.

This is echoed by Yin, who feels that "Typologies often emerge through the process of filing" (1989: 94), and encourages the researcher to look for patterns, diagrams and metaphors. These last are helpful in generating creativity, by providing multiple, alternative lenses through which to view the School – as an orchestra, SAS unit, or television production team, for instance. These have proven useful at staff development events such as the residential awaydays in June and December 2006.

Both Yin (1989) and Burgess (1984a: 182) concur in their reminder that the general strategy for analysis should be based on specific theoretical propositions which shape the research questions in the first place (Yin, 1989: 106). It is equally important to remain vigilant and pay attention to rival propositions, too.

Yin outlines two specific analytic strategies which are equally relevant to the project:

Pattern-matching, which tests notions that one pattern depends on another, and examines threats to the validity of the research which appear to yield alternative explanations for phenomena observed (1989: 111).

Explanation-building, which is an iterative process in need of constant revisiting in the light of emerging details (1989: 114-5). It is possible in this case to envisage an initial set of explanations from the learning set transcripts, which may need revision following participant interviews.

Although Bassey points out that "Categorization is a dangerous game" (1999: 64), he does not counsel against it, rather suggesting a careful approach to coding of data items, analytical statements and alternative explanations.

The wisdom of identifying 'observer effect' is underlined by Gillham – "look out for the probable influence of your presence" (2000: 47).

Reporting and Writing the Case

The literature focuses variously on the style and approaches to writing up the case study, and also on structures and processes which support successful writing. The reader might conclude that the idea of an orthodox approach to writing case study has waned, and that a wide range of options is now open to the researcher. However, all the authors underline how difficult it is to write up a convincing and valid case study, in a terrain where the pitfalls appear to be legion.

One significant danger seems to lie in leaving writing too late:

> "Most investigators typically ignore the compositional phase until the very end of their case studies" (Yin, 1989: 128).

In my case, it was helpful to be obliged, by the nature of the Progress Reports submitted regularly during the lifetime of the project, to begin the writing process early.

Although Gillham's section on analysing and presenting the data is disappointingly limited to a mere eight pages, he is succinct in his distinction between clarity and fluency in writing, pointing out that, in contrast with the former, the latter is all too easy to achieve, resulting in:

> "...a glibness which means that you glide over the surface, engaging with nothing" (2000: 98).

Bailey finds in case study a sense of freedom from the need for scientific objectivity, which makes it attractive because of its "lack of pretense of moral neutrality" (1996: 8).

She also finds emancipation in the notion of a critical perspective which is feasible, indeed desirable, in writing up field work. She notes the responsibility of the researcher

> "...to document, understand, and change the way that powerful groups oppress powerless groups. A goal of much of this research is to empower the people in the setting toward meaningful social change." (1996: 28).

Whereas at the outset of the project, I conceived this in terms solely of ensuring that as researcher and line manager I was not abusing my own power role, the context of threat facing the School later placed the critical dimension in another light. This led to my adopting a stronger constructivist stance than had been planned at the outset.

Bailey stresses that a critical perspective must be set against the researcher's own worldview, and hence be values-based. This contrasts significantly with Van Maanen's 'realist tales' (1995), which call for a more traditional reporting approach in which "any details about the author are absent from the body of the text" (Bailey, 1996: 106). From this perspective, the researcher's responsibility is to present concrete details and put across members' points of view. In my situation, with the author as a key participant, this cannot be the case.

Alternative approaches to writing up the case study are given considerable space by Bailey, who highlights more experimental genres, including poetic representation, 'narrative of the self' or ethnographic fictional representations – all of which use the conventions of fiction. She even gives examples of ethnographic drama (intended to be performed) and mixed genre portrayal, such as telling three stories in parallel. All of these approaches might be considered

'high risk' in the context of the Doctorate, and - most importantly – would be unlikely to be taken seriously by readers in the higher education sector.

Nevertheless, Bailey's assertion of the importance of locating oneself in offering interpretations is relevant, and does not imply

> "...writing narcissistic and self-indulgent accounts of one's every mood in the setting" (1996: 115).

Once again, it is Yin who has most to offer in terms of a thought-out set of views on intended audiences and structures when considering case study. Although it may be possible to imagine using parts of the thesis for subsequent publication for other stakeholders, including colleagues, non-specialists and eventual research funders, the key audience for this piece of work is what Yin terms the 'thesis committee'. In this situation,

> "...mastery of the methodology and the theoretical issues of a case study topic, an indication of the care with which the research was conducted, and evidence that the student has successfully negotiated all phases of the research process are important." (1989: 130)

Of equal importance is the significance of the findings.

In terms of form, the approach taken with this project is that of a single narrative with an embedded design – that is, individual participants are treated as sub-units within a larger whole, that of the ALS group.

Yin considers six structure types, of which my case study is a combination of three. It is not in itself a linear-analytic structure, though the thesis as a whole is. The case study chapter itself, comprising some 40% of the total thesis length, is chronological, theory-building and also has a 'suspense' structure.

In that it attempts to demonstrate some sense (in the case of specific research propositions) of causal sequences over time, it is chronological. Yin warns

against the dangers of giving too high a proportion of space to early events, arguing for even chronological attention across the entire time span (1989: 139). One approach which I adopted, suggested by Yin, was to draft backwards initially, thus preventing too many simplistic, 'false' causal links.

A theory-building structure is topically-built (but can at the same time be chronological within each topic) – at its best, according to Yin:

> "...the entire sequence produces a compelling statement that can be most impressive." (1989: 139)

The 'suspense' structure presents the outcome initially, then explains how it was generated. In the case of this thesis, the opening contextual chapter presents the outcome clearly. This can often be "an engaging compositional structure", in Yin's view (1989: 140).

In effect, the case study provides a 'fused' structure which combines elements of all three.

In terms specifically of work on action learning, Coghlan and Pedler propose a framework for dissertations which relates directly to Revans's theory. This involves using his Systems Alpha, Beta and Gamma as follows:

- System Alpha – identification and analysis of a real organizational difficulty;
- System Beta – exploration of the use of "cycles of action and reflection" (2006: 134) to resolve the problem;
- System Gamma – exploration of the participants' "views and understandings" (ibid.).

It is at this third level of exploration that my constructivist stance is most clearly displayed.

In terms of the structure of this thesis, System Alpha is addressed in Chapter 1, while Beta and Gamma form the basis of the case study. Coghlan and Pedler

also cite an earlier articulation by Pedler of "four strands of learning...which make up the whole 'DNA' of the action learning dissertation" (ibid.), adding analysis of relevant literature to the three strands from Revans's theory.

Personal, Institutional and Ethical Issues

Here, the methodological questions are:

- How do politics and power influence my work?
- To what extent does my own 'insiderness' distort the research?

The project was timely in the dual sense that at the time it was conducted:
- the College was implementing a Strategic Plan 2004-2010 following the appointment in July 2003 of a new Principal;
- there was a national emphasis on enhancing leadership, governance and management in higher education as part of the UK government's agenda for the 'modernization' of public services.

However, these political factors created both inherent benefits and drawbacks for the research project. In the first instance, the College Principal, as my line manager, strongly encouraged the research project from the perspectives of my professional development and of his support for the institutional change agenda underlying the Strategic Plan. However, if the institution's managerial, financial or human resource priorities were to change during the three-year span of the study (during one of the most turbulent periods experienced in recent higher education history), the extent to which my project would be supported – or undermined – had the potential to shift significantly.

As a middle manager in operational terms (School leadership) with institution-wide strategic responsibilities (for Regional Engagement and International Strategies), I undertook a complex set of duties, albeit in a small institution. I was subject to the very vulnerability faced by middle managers which is identified by Hellawell and Hancock (2001: 193), but was also to some extent one of the senior managers of the institution, and thus part of the 'power

culture'. These authors emphasize that the position of the middle manager is exacerbated by feeling "vulnerable to attack from below as well as above" (2001: 194). This made my position as initiator of a democratically-run (sic) action learning set particularly delicate.

Further issues are highlighted by Hockey's discussion of researching peers and familiar settings. When the peers are themselves educational professionals, these issues become all the more intense:

> "A particular problem of conducting research on trained social scientists is their tendency to offer a version of the world already filtered through the lens of their particular discipline" (1993: 199).

As members of a fairly learning-centred teacher training-based institution, my peers were likely to be intrinsically interested in action learning as a means of enhancing learning, which would bring a strong sense of 'knowingness' to their behaviour in the sets. I would therefore need to adopt a position which took any resultant distortion into account.

Hockey cites a key disadvantage of insider research as the familiarity with the research context, in that this impedes the analysis and reflection on the data collected. In my own case, although I was used to working with colleagues by virtue of managing their activity, planning teaching and allocating resources, the processes of analyzing and reflecting on this work did not, in the contemporaneous reality, come as second nature. I suffered from the lack of personal effectiveness identified by McCaffery (2004: 282-3) in tending to deal with immediate priorities in preference to more strategic, longer-term issues.

Hockey points to the specific advantages claimed for insider research: there is no culture shock for the researcher; as insider, the researcher is unobtrusive and "less likely to alter the research setting" (1993: 204); the researcher possesses knowledge of "language and behavioural cues" (1993: 204) and can appreciate "the full complexity of the social world at hand" (1993: 205). Many of these

claims hold true for this research project, although the idea of blending into situations was not applicable in the case of the action learning sets. Not only was I the instigating researcher responsible for the very existence of the sets, I was also (as manager) the lead 'champion of change'. This latter role might have emerged as more significant than the research aspect; the fact of being the researcher might not in itself have caused undue distortion.

A further advantage is that

> "...the more integrated one is as an insider with one's subjects, the greater the chance that the research process will have a powerful impact upon one's self..."

and furthermore that the research

> "...is liable to have effects long after the termination of the field work...upon...the group that has been studied" (1993: 211).

In terms of working with peers, Hockey reports personalized relationships, self-consciousness on the part of the researcher, social inequalities and personal hostility as being potentially problematic. These were all issues to which I needed to remain alert.

There was a clear sense in early ALS meetings of the resonance for participants of the idea of the researcher as insider. However, the apparently self-evident nature of the insider perspective in the case of this project should be subject to critical questioning. Hellawell contends

> "...that ideally the researcher should be both inside *and* outside the perceptions of the 'researched'" (2006: 5).

This highlights the importance both of empathy and what Hellawell calls 'alienation' "in its strictly Brechtian sense of distancing or making strange" (2006: 53). In analysing the data, attention is paid to evidence of both these notions in the perceptions of ALS members, including the researcher. At the

very least, a certain sense of distance does exist by virtue of the researcher having a line management function in relation to the other set members.

Rather than seeing the simultaneous insider and outsider positions as being conflictual, Hellawell presents this as not

> "...one continuum but... a multiple series of parallel ones. There may be some elements of insiderness on some dimensions of your research and some elements of outsiderness on other dimensions" (2006: 7).

For me, insiderness is defined, *inter alia*, by a shared academic discipline with colleagues, a shared notion of being not in the 'inner circle' of senior management, a shared sense of team. Outsiderness was also evidenced in the nature of my employment as a manager (Dean of School), the fact that I had another role which demanded time outside the School (as Director of Regional Affairs), and the very small amount of time I spent directly with students.

Several other factors also came to light during the process of data collection and analysis. These include Bailey's rationale for confidentiality as essential to avoiding harm to research participants, and her cautions on gender bias and other status characteristics affecting research outcomes (1996: 18-22).

It is surprising that although Bailey includes both gender and ethnicity among her status characteristics, she makes no mention of power as a factor. For this study, it was a highly significant element, given that I was not only a full participant in the research which I have instigated, but was also line manager of all the other participants. Bailey's suggestion that the impact of status characteristics can be made less significant through 'greater reciprocity' is relevant. This can be achieved, she suggests, by expressing feelings, 'showing a human side' and answering questions which may occur during interviews (1996: 77).

There is Yin's problematic notion that "anonymity is not to be considered a desirable outcome" (1989: 143), despite the fact that I promised confidentiality, where practicable, for participants. Nevertheless, Yin offers a solution by stating that anonymity is necessary in situations where the case study is aimed at portraying an 'ideal type'. In breaking new ground by studying action learning as a leadership tool in higher education, it is indeed feasible to conceive of the case study as leading to the identification of an ideal type (in this case, the questioning, self-managing ALS participant), whether or not it proved sustainable in the wider institutional context in which it was situated.

Bailey highlights the need for a planned and sensitively-implemented exit strategy when leaving the field (1996: 85-6). Among the reasons for doing this is the possible dependence which may have been created by the research activity, although this was less likely to be problematic in the case of the researcher continuing to be a member of the professional community on the research site. In any case, it seems legitimate for members of an action learning set to determine their own future strategy for whether or not to continue to meet, regardless of any cut-off date for data collection. This date was fixed before the set began meeting, and formed the basis on which members decided to commit themselves to joining in the first place.

A number of further considerations, including those of organizational politics for insider researchers, are discussed helpfully by Brannick and Coghlan. The writers contest the statement by Morse (1998: 61) about the inadvisability for an investigator of conducting qualitative research in a setting where he or she works, on the grounds that this "may place the researcher in an untenable position." Brannick and Coghlan accept that there is potential danger for the researcher in terms of "remaining a member within a desired career path when the research is completed" (2007: 59-60). However, they dispute the criticisms of insider research in terms of epistemology and methodology.

Of particular interest is their focus on a range of research paradigms, including that of Critical Realism and Action Research (which they conflate), stating that it:

> "...concentrates on epistemic reflexivity, which looks at exposing interests and enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity" (2007: 63).

This view chimes with the variety of Critical Action Learning discussed earlier as identified by Pedler et al (2005).

The theoretical claims made by Brannick and Coghlan include those that insider research leads to "developing understanding of the role of the manager and the internal dynamics of organizations" and to understanding of organizational change, both of which are key themes in the research project (2007: 65-66).

However, I disagree with their view that "Action research focuses on research in action rather than research about action" (2007: 65). In the case of my project on action learning, it is clearly by definition about the co-existence of the two.

In terms of organizational politics, my situation did not turn out as expected. The dilemmas identified by Brannick and Coghlan – of "role conflict... loyalty tugs, behavioral claims, and identification dilemmas" (2007: 70) – did not occur in terms of relationships within the School (where the power dimension might have been predicted to be most problematic). The most problematic area was in fact due to factors identified later by the authors:

> "Undertaking a research project in one's own organization is political and might even be considered subversive...
> Throughout the project [insider action researchers] have to maintain their credibility as an effective driver of change and as an astute political player" (2007: 71).

Blaxter et al (1996: 144-149) provide an overview of further problematic issues which can arise, including interference by sponsors, the right of subjects to

refuse to participate, and problems of confidentiality and anonymity which need to be addressed both when gathering data and when disseminating findings. They emphasize that:

> "Research ethics is about being clear about the nature of the agreement you have entered into with your research subjects or contacts" (1996: 145).

Burgess (1984a: 198-200) distinguishes between 'open' and 'closed' research, which serves as a reminder that my project did not involve any elements of covert research, but that its 'openness' depended on transparent communication and agreement. At the first set meeting in 2004, the external facilitator (present in the set for the first meeting only in order to model the role of facilitator) brokered an agreement on collaboration in the research by all set members. This was recorded on tape and subsequently transcribed. Set members felt that they did not need written contractual agreements.

A number of writers raise the question of the need for the researcher to be clear about what and how to disseminate. Hockey (1993: 219-220) points to the impossibility of disguising members of the same institution from one another, but gives consideration to ways in which data can be written up in order to point to key theoretical issues, while omitting details which enable participants to be identified. I was concerned to ensure that all participants received, in advance of submission of the thesis, the transcripts of their utterances, in order to give their consent to these being used for the research. I also gave alpha-numerical codes to each participant when writing up the research.

Another point of learning for me was the consideration of ethics as a continuous and ongoing process (Burgess, 1984a: 207), to which I attempted to give constant attention through my research journal.

Research Framework and Approach

This aspect of the research is guided by the question:

- To what extent will I draw on appropriate qualitative and/or quantitative methodology to inform my work?

In order to construct a story-telling case study which provides an account of "educational events, projects, programmes or systems aimed at illuminating them" (Bassey, 1999: 62), it was important to gather data appropriately.

In the case of action learning sets, the most obvious way of recording meetings is to record and transcribe them selectively. As Burgess states, "...only relevant materials should be completely transcribed" (1984a: 121). This begs the question of how to define relevance.

Analysis of the recordings could be undertaken by focusing on critical incidents or turning-points in the meetings, employing a discourse analysis approach. A qualitative approach would focus on documenting

> "the ways in which meanings are constructed, negotiated within particular social contexts and become regarded as taken for granted" (The Open University, 2004: 42).

Given the constructivist framework applied to the research project, a quantitative approach would not have been appropriate.

Burgess suggests that it is not always possible to define in advance how to analyse data – it may be preferable rather to:

> "...provide analytic descriptions whereby the conceptual scheme used is developed on the basis of the data that are obtained" (1984a:182).

After the initial pilot ALS in May 2004, five ALS meetings took place at intervals of three to six weeks between February and June 2006. All meetings were recorded and transcribed, and each lasted between two and two and a half hours, following the "alternative approach" outlined in McGill and Brockbank. This is proposed in recognition of the fact

> "...that not all organizations and individuals can devote the time suggested [of preferably a whole day]...it is important to acknowledge situations where time is a constraint and where action learning for improvement is seen as being feasible but for transformation less significant" (2004: 78-79).

Their approach allows for the following breakdown of time slots:

- Set opening – 5 minutes
- Presentation and analysis of issues – 20 minutes per participant (maximum of 100 minutes in total)
- Drafting and suggestion of action plans – 15 minutes
- Review of the set meeting – 10 minutes

Walford (2001: 93) offers reassurance that "There can be no firm rules about transcription", cautioning against "the fetish that most of us have about transcribing every tape-recording." Key interchanges in the discourse are highlighted for analysis and for use with colleagues as part of the Action Research cycle, in which a key stage is "feeding the data back to relevant others" (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005: 93).

Coghlan and Brannick (2005: 99) also emphasize that for insider researchers, data is generated all the time, in the forms of daily behavioural observations, e-mails from set members, meetings and discussions, and should be captured and reflected on. This highlights again the importance of my research journal, for which advice from Moon (1999) was helpful.

In undertaking the fieldwork, it was important to ensure that lessons from the literature be applied to enabling ALS participants to reflect on and evaluate their experience. McGill and Brockbank (2004: 239) emphasize the need to define clearly the stakeholders of action learning processes, and to evaluate in terms of the expectations of such stakeholders. These include the INTED departmental members who were not members of the ALS, with whom it was

important to explore feelings of potential exclusion from what might have been perceived as an 'inner circle' or elite grouping within the School.

It was important, in planning work over the period of investigation, to ensure that the sequences of reading the literature, reviewing methodology, and data-gathering and analysis ran in parallel. There came a time (at the start of the Summer vacation in 2006) when no further recorded ALS meetings took place, and a separate time around six months later when the end of the period of the study occurred. Although the ongoing story of institutional development and impact continued (and remained a daily focus of my job), it was no longer analysed for the purposes of the thesis. As Coghlan and Brannick advise, it is

> "important to set a date, after which, whatever takes place, however exciting and relevant, will not be included in your story" (2004: 103).

Moyles highlights that it is "important to know what type and level of analysis you intend to employ *before* collecting your data" (2002: 185), warning that participant observation is a covert activity (2002: 177), with risks of observer bias in terms of selective attention, encoding, memory and interpersonal factors (2002: 179).

She is helpful in suggesting specifically how excessive transcription can be avoided by choosing five-minute slots "across the recording to sample" (2002: 185). This is helpful, in that even with the meetings and semi-structured interviews associated with one six-member Set, some 17 hours of recordings were generated.

Moyles's reminders (2002: 187) of the need for triangulation for reliability and validity chime with Bush's notions of authenticity. For the latter, reliability is critical in terms both of the approach taken to observation and of the realisation of the case study. The question concerning the observation is whether or not another observer, using the same theoretical and interpretative framework, would have seen the same as the participant researcher in my case study. His

concern with the case study is over replicability elsewhere (2002: 63-64). As each month passes, reports in the higher education press suggest common concerns over leadership styles of senior managers, pressures created by mounting accountability, and a deteriorating climate in the university workplace – all of which suggest that the research is more likely than previously anticipated to be both replicable and generalisable.

In order to triangulate the data, semi-structured interviews with the five individual set members (other than myself) were also used. These were conceived as conversations, in which the researcher

> "...engages in a series of friendly exchanges in order to find out about people's [experiences]" (Burgess, 1984a: 103).

Potential problems with which I needed to engage included deciding on the length and depth, topic focus and question order for the interviews. Experience of other interviewers suggests that the optimum length may be between 45 and 90 minutes. Burgess provides a helpful operational guide to conducting interviews, including tips on posing questions using participants' own words and repeating phrases "in order to probe" (1984a: 117).

Further data was obtained, for subsequent analysis, from notes which I took during each set meeting, and from my own personal research journal. Blaxter et al (1996: 48-49) provide useful examples of formats and ways of organizing such journals or diaries. The *Programme Guide* stresses the importance of documenting other events, external to the research, which affect the reflectivity of the researcher (The Open University, 2004: 44). These include the significant changes in the College's political climate, reported in Chapter 1, and my recorded responses to them in the research journal.

Reliability and Validity

In order to demonstrate the trustworthiness of my research accounts, it is important to acquire a detailed understanding of the established frameworks for

observation, analysis and evaluation in educational contexts. This needs to take into account not only the possibilities, but also the limitations, of the situations being researched. According to Bassey, trustworthiness depends partly on acquiring "sufficient data" (1999: 60). He offers eight questions for ensuring trustworthiness at the different stages of:

- collecting raw data
- analyzing the raw data (deriving from effective triangulation)
- interpreting the analytical statements

Burgess establishes the concept of internal and external validity, to deal respectively with the influence of the researcher and with the ways in which the research can be generalized to other situations. He advocates the use of multiple strategies:

> "When the researcher takes one method and utilizes multiple strategies it is usually for reliability" (1984a: 153).

The research project employed three of Burgess's four categories of triangulation:

- Data triangulation (by gathering data across time and space)
- Theory triangulation (by testing more than one theory)
- Methodological triangulation (by using set recordings, interviews and written texts)

Claims made for other means of conducting enquiry and reporting, such as those reported in Dadds and Hart (2001), may contribute to the reliability of the research they purport to validate. These means include visualization and fictional writing, but do not seem appropriate to employ in the context of an action research project in which

> "...the outcomes of action learning... must be tested in the real world of real responsibility by real people in real time" (Revans, 1983: 22).

Evaluation

One other key aspect of reliability concerns the role played by evaluation of the research being undertaken. In discussing a framework for evaluation of research by others, Burgess provides useful material for self-evaluation. He identifies three areas for evaluation:

> "... the general principles that guide the investigation...
> "... the principles of research design and the ways in which these principles are utilized within a study...
> "... research methods or techniques of investigation" (1984a: 210).

He also considers the need to address both the impact of a study being evaluated, and the research questions which remain unanswered. These served as useful guides for constant reflection during the project.

Yin is highly specific in his typology of validity and reliability, citing construct validity (evidenced in data collection), internal validity (data analysis), and external validity (in the research design) (1989: 41). He offers the practical suggestion of inviting participants and peers to review the draft case study, even considering that their comments could be published within the final case if it proved helpful. This process corroborates the construct validity in his view (1989: 144), and was in fact a helpful process when used in the draft case study for this project.

Bassey complements these frameworks by identifying eight factors of 'trustworthiness', including the provision of an adequate audit trail in the case record (1999: 75).

Bassey builds on Yin's idea of peer review by suggesting the usefulness of incorporating an Audit Certificate (1999: 90-1) in the case study, and provides an example of this in his appendices. It is questionable whether this is appropriate in the context of the thesis, although it might be assumed that the

supervisor's regular engagement with the emerging research is tantamount to an ongoing process of internal review and audit.

This section of the Chapter has attempted to respond to the methodological questions:

- How reliable can I make my observations?
- How can I monitor and evaluate my ethical stance?

Reflexivity

My own personal role as researcher was fraught with potential problems. The 'Researcher Continuum' devised by LeGallais provides some helpful indicators of potential benefits and pitfalls of various sets of relationships between researchers and their participants. The continuum ranges from "No knowledge of the field of research" (2005: 2) to "Peer to the respondents" (2005: 1).

While this helps in clarifying my position in terms of knowledge of the world of HE, the culture of the organization being researched, the specific curriculum area, and my knowledge of the respondents, it arguably does not go far enough in that I was not strictly a peer to the respondents, but actually their line manager. If a further pole position were added to the continuum, all the potential benefits and pitfalls would be exaggerated, including the risks presented by researcher bias, and the presumption of researcher knowledge by both parties. It could be argued that the personal relationships between the researcher and respondent were less significant than for peers (although this may depend on the assumed leadership style of the manager), and that the corresponding benefit of the "potential for achieving in-depth empathetic access to and interpretation of data" (ibid.) might be somewhat reduced. This is an area which was tested by respondent interviews.

The insider-outsider continuum is also important because of its argued impact (Hellawell, 2006) as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in researchers. There is a reinforcing sense in some of the literature of greater rather than

diminished validity as a result of the researcher as participant. Lomax is particularly encouraging in this respect, stating emphatically that

> "… research should be done by educational managers themselves and not by so-called experts" (2002: 135).

He makes a case for self-awareness and reflexivity by arguing:

> "It is one of the strengths of action research… that the research starts with the researcher's own values" (2002: 128).

For West-Burnham and Ireson (2005), values have a role to play in the 'personal authenticity' of leaders, which derives from the overlap and connectedness between cognitive and affective literacy (the ability to dialogue meaningfully with self and others), moral and spiritual values, and action (2005: 17). They argue that:

> "Leadership development might… be seen as the process of becoming personally authentic" (2005: 18).

In their resource material for leadership development, the authors claim:

> "At the heart of effective leadership is a model of learning that is rooted in personal reflection to enable and enhance understanding and so inform action…Structured reflection is central to any approach to enhancing and sustaining personal and professional effectiveness" (2005: 5).

This link between reflection, understanding and action is crucial to Action Learning.

It was conceivable that the research project, and its orientation towards learning processes, would be instrumental in changing fundamentally the way in which I worked. The research project would therefore serve as an apprenticeship for a novice researcher, and might enable me to develop new awareness. This degree of unfamiliarity – with processes, rather than the context – may have served to counter the disadvantage noted (but not defended) by Hockey. Similarly, the act

of transcribing and analyzing the set meetings and interviews allowed me to gain new insights and overcame any "taken-for-granted assumptions" (1993: 202). In this way, I could apply the idea reported by Hockey of developing "self-conscious strategies to make the familiar problematic" (1993: 208).

Brannick and Coghlan make a powerful case for the benefits of rich and complex inside knowledge,

> "...arguing that as researchers through a process of reflexive awareness, we are able to articulate tacit knowledge that has become deeply segmented because of socialization in an organizational setting and reframe it as theoretical knowledge" (2007: 60).

There is no doubt in my mind that my own personal responses to managing my own ALS activity, and that of the other members of the School (including all the other five participants of the ALS) through a very difficult period – and one which paralleled similar and simultaneous experiences throughout the higher education sector – need to be recorded among those of the other set participants. Day (2002: Para. 2) offers some helpful perspectives on interweaving "multiple voices and realities into the telling of the story", although there would clearly be dangers in taking her suggestions too far in the context of a doctoral thesis. This applies particularly to Day's incorporation of poems and a painting into the presentation of her findings. Nevertheless, I have included my own narrative ('The Leader's Story') within the case study in Chapter 4.

In the case study, I document some key interactions from some of the ALS sessions, and reflections on these. As researcher and instigator of the set, I was the only participant who took part in all the sessions – not surprisingly, as they were organized around my own diary (since it would not have been feasible to gather and analyse the data if I had not been present).

It is evident from my contributions to the ALS sessions that I took many opportunities to explore and reinforce my understanding of my own identity as

a leader, and to attempt to use the ALS to implement distributed leadership through enabling and supporting colleagues in realizing some of the targets they had set for themselves in appraisal. In a small way, the fact that I did not facilitate any of the sessions, but that we rotated this responsibility to enable others to develop the skill, is an example of implicit distributed leadership.

It is difficult to separate the myriad ways in which I influenced the organizational culture of the School from the specific influence of the ALS.

It is also challenging to differentiate the effect on my thinking and practice of the following parallel processes:

- Learning derived from carrying out my specific project in the ALS
- Learning about individual and group learning derived from the action learning process
- Learning from submitting progress reports on my own Doctorate programme
- Leadership development initiatives in which I was taking part separately (Fellowship project of the LFHE; Leadership Development Centre)
- Reading relevant literature for the literature review and methodology chapters of my own Doctorate
- Ideas derived from working with peers in the College and externally
- Change in the higher education sector as a whole, of which the context of my project is reflective

However, as the research project was conceived as action research, it seems at least partially legitimate for its development to reflect a more organic, less-controlled process of emergence, noting a wide range of influences.

My initial hypothesis, that action learning might be a suitable tool for strategic leadership, was one about which I was careful not to be over-explicit with participants, in order to avoid a distorting effect. For this reason, I did not overtly discuss ideas of distributed leadership, change of organizational culture,

theory on action learning or other notions which underpin the research propositions. It was important to allow these to emerge from the data.

After some careful consideration during the revision process of completing the thesis, the research propositions identified at the end of Chapter 2 were reduced from fourteen to eight. One of the criteria for determining the reduction was to exclude original propositions which necessitated using evidence deriving solely or largely from my own contributions to the ALS, and which were not theoretically-derived from the literature. It is also worth noting that the revised propositions do not include 'micro' propositions about the internal workings of the ALS sessions.

To some extent, there was a self-fulfilling prophecy in my experience in and beyond the ALS sessions. Because I was personally determined, for instance, that the learning from the ALS should be transferable to other aspects of my professional life, I set out to improve and apply more widely my coaching skills. These were influenced empirically by the Set, but also by theoretical reading, by attending an NCSL learning event on coaching, by experiencing a role model through being coached for my Fellowship, and so on. Evidence is readily available in the data of the opportunities I found to practise coaching skills, as demonstrated later in the case study.

One might conclude at this stage that, in order for action learning to make its fullest impact on participants, it is important that it be carried out as part of an action research project in which all participants are themselves researchers. However, this was not the case with this project – and this was deliberately avoided in order to make for a different kind of case study. Any further conclusions are reserved until Chapter 5.

In terms of Rooke and Torbert's framework of action logics (2005), it appears to me that during my period of work in the College I made an unintentional transition from the Achiever to Individualist action logic, the catalyst for which

was the appointment of the new Principal. This provided an insight into the potential threat which I represented to senior management in the institution.

Individualists, for instance, demonstrate

> "...awareness of a possible conflict between their principles and their actions, or between the organization's values and its implementation of those values. This conflict becomes the source of tension, creativity, and a growing desire for further development" (2005: 5).

This explains my interest in using action learning as a source of development. However, there are negative aspects:

> "Individualists also tend to ignore rules they regard as irrelevant, which often makes them a source of irritation to both colleagues and bosses." (ibid.)

Further detail is given in an example known to the authors of a female executive who

> "...formed a highly cohesive team within budget and... ahead of schedule...[however, she] had a reputation within the wider organization as a wild card. Although she showed great political savvy when it came to her individual projects, she put many people's noses out of joint... because of her unique, unconventional ways of operating... her failure to acknowledge key organizational processes" (ibid.).

This mirrors my own experience in the College.

The 'Seven Action Logics' also offered an explanation as to the different perceptions which senior managers had of my role in directing regional activity at the College. I was applying, again unintentionally, a different logic – that of Strategists, who:

> "...focus on organizational constraints and perceptions,
> which they treat as discussable and transformable... [they] are
> highly effective change agents." (ibid.)

It is therefore understandable that senior managers found it difficult to reconcile my apparent resistance to desired change, as defined by themselves, in the School of International Education.

Implications of the Findings

The process of writing this thesis has raised questions for me concerning:

- How will the research enable me to generalize?

Given the number of variables involved in the research, and given its nature as a 'study of singularity', it seems appropriate to suggest that the findings might lead to what Bassey terms 'fuzzy generalizations'. These are differentiated from scientific generalization and statistical generalization, as

> "... the kind of prediction, arising from empirical enquiry,
> that says that something *may* happen, but without any
> measure of its probability" (1999: 46).

Bassey justifies this form of generalization as

> "...intellectually honest... a succinct way in which
> educational research can contribute to professional discourse"
> (1999: 54).

In terms of theory building and testing, it was important over the months of the research process to record (using the research diary as well as Progress Reports) what Watling calls

> "...changes in your theory base – discussing the alternative
> viewpoints you have considered and explaining why some of
> them were not thought suitable" (2002: 74).

He claims that this

> "...is one way of showing your critically analytical approach to your work" (ibid.).

In preparing to write up and report on the findings of the research, no writer has been more helpful to me than Bassey (1999, 2002). His seven possible stages in conducting case study build up progressively to writing-up, concluding with:

- Generating and testing analytical statements
- Interpreting or explaining the analytical statements
- Deciding on the outcome and writing the case report (2002: 115)

Bassey's notion of case study which is conceived as story-telling remains compelling, with the purpose of describing and analyzing

> "...educational events, projects, programmes or systems aimed at illuminating them" (1999: 62).

A final work which suggests criteria for analysis and evaluation of the data is that of Fenwick (2003), who undertakes a critical study of action learning within the domain of organizational learning, pointing out that its advocates often lack awareness of the negative role played by practitioners - who are frequently power-wielding managerialists – in obviating any potential for action learning to be emancipatory. She sweeps aside energetically some of the claims made for action learning by writers such as Revans (1980), Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1993), on the grounds that they approached their work from the perspective of the drive to "improve delivery to shareholders" (2003: 619).

Fenwick proposes specific enhancements which enable action learning to be more emancipatory, and which correspond to the experience of the ALS: in that it focuses on the "workers' problems and interests", it gives attention to factors "that unjustly exclude or privilege individuals or groups", acknowledges the complexity and "contested nature of learning" and uses power democratically (2003: 620).

Nevertheless, it seems to me problematic that Fenwick's argument concentrates on a context of profit-making and productivity in an industrial paradigm, despite the fact that she draws on work carried out in wider professional fields, such as public sector and educational organizations. In accusing organizational developers of failing to consider "the significance of social and cultural capital in people's learning" (2003: 623), she appears not to take into account the professional cultures prevailing in these fields of public service. If the people who volunteer to participate in an ALS do so because they perceive themselves as contributing to creating a developmental climate in their organization, the notion of productivity – and hence manipulation by managers – takes on a different hue. In my case, the ALS was not only set in an educational context, but crucially, in a setting in which trainer training and reflexivity are at the core of its daily business. Fenwick's statements about the "ever-present dark side" (2003: 626) to action learning do seem somewhat hyperbolic in such a context.

However, Fenwick's reminders of the dangers of failing to enable emancipation are useful to this project. The dangers include the potential for organizational learning initiatives to

> "...become the very mechanisms of control and even oppression from which they are supposed to emancipate" (2003: 623).

This needed to be checked constantly as the ALS evolved over time, and was raised in the post-ALS interviews with each member.

Other factors which affect participants' constructs include those of gender, race and class, and these also required vigilant monitoring (2003: 624). A final aspect to check in interviews was manifestation for and in participants of the five facets of empowerment advocated by Herbert (2002): capacity-building, facilitation, advocacy, illumination and liberation.

Taking into account important qualifications of the notion of generalizing about implications, it is nevertheless possible to imagine that, with the current increase in interest in what have hitherto been regarded as 'soft' management approaches, now supported and disseminated by the LFHE, the findings of the research will prove of widespread interest in the sector. It is therefore important to give due consideration to further questions raised by the project which might be addressed by future researchers, and these are presented at the end of Chapter 5.

Chapter 4. Case Study

Note: The reader is referred, before reading the case study, to the Appendices. These provide important evidence of the research processes underpinning the case study. They also offer reference material, in the form of grids and tables, which provide a clear framework in which to contextualize the study.

The First Action Learning Set Experience

During the first set meeting, a number of comments were made which referred to the emergence of what McGill and Beaty (1995: 84) call "a learning and development culture", as highlighted by the very existence of the set:

> "…it's about trust and sharedness as opposed to secrecy and collusion" Facilitator;
>
> "Having this meeting here… changes the quality of the discussion… [and] the insights that people might provide… We wouldn't have known that if we hadn't sat around a table this afternoon… it's remarkable how the organization and set-up of the meeting… of the encounter… enables us to do that" Participant 4 (P4).

Before exploring further the ways in which the first meeting offered insights into notions identified in the literature, it is worth telling the story of the 100-minute encounter in more detail.

Five colleagues, with a wide range of different roles and grades within the School, came to the meeting with varying expectations and preconceptions. Their respective posts covered being Head of Postgraduate Programmes, Administrative Assistant, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer/Head of Short Courses, and Dean of School (myself). This was a group of people who had not previously worked together as a team. In a diagram representing their daily interaction with one another, there would be many one-to-one linkages, but very few ways in which they came together in groupings larger than pairs. The only exceptions

to this pattern were the weekly Friday morning briefing meetings (20 minutes long) and the bi-monthly staff meetings of up to two hours – in these gatherings, a larger group of up to 15 members was usually present, and the format followed much more strongly the patterns of business meetings.

The Lecturer who was present had stated a wish to observe the ALS process without speaking, and in the event had to leave the session after about 45 minutes.

The only specific preparation which group members had was that they had read, in the months leading up to the set meeting, an article by Beaty et al (1993) which provided some practical insights into becoming an ALS member. This had been discussed by four of the five participants during a staff development session.

The first meeting was facilitated by an academic colleague from another School in the College, someone who had considerable experience of ALS through his leadership of training programmes for Personal Advisers for the *Connexions* Service. He was known for his belief in action learning, and for the supportive, caring persona he presented in the College. In the event, he was able to build an atmosphere of trust, brokering agreement on practical steps where necessary (such as timekeeping issues and the form of task-setting for the next meeting) and building confidence in the participants. This last point was significant, as two specific comments came from participants within the first ten minutes of the session:

> "I was rather hoping not to come and have to say something" Participant 1 (P1);
>
> "Nobody really knows quite how to do it" (P4).

All participants agreed that it would be sensible, within the time available, for four colleagues to present their projects and related issues, with a fifth taking a listening role. By the end of the meeting, a volunteer emerged for a non-

presenting set facilitator for the second meeting. The role model presented by the external facilitator was clearly seen as helpful.

It was remarkable how the discussions emerging from each presenter fitted the allotted twenty minutes naturally and consistently. Each presenter took between two and seven minutes to outline their own project and, following the facilitator's suggestion, phrased a key question relating to an issue about which they wished to learn more. The topics and questions can be summarized as in the figure below:

	Project Topic	***Question to Set members***
Participant 1	Development of a School policy on learner autonomy	To what extent are you an autonomous learner?
Participant 2	Customer service improvement across the School	How can I follow up on a 'benchmarking' visit to a local hotel?
Participant 3	Collaborative creation of a School Plan 2004-2009	How to engage colleagues in the process?
Participant 4	Extending the notion of review and reflection as tools for learning	What is your personal experience of the value of review and/or reflection?

Fig. 4.1 Project Topics and Questions in ALS 1

All the topics and questions appeared to interest and engage all participants, and the ensuing dialogue was constructive. There was no suggestion during this first meeting of any 'baggage' which hindered the working relationships across the set. Indeed, there was a sense of an experience which was special because of its very novelty, and because of the opportunities it afforded for discussion of a quality not otherwise available in the everyday life of the School. Although at 100 minutes the duration of the whole meeting was slightly shorter than the average staff meeting, there was a feeling, which was tested through interviews and a short questionnaire, of having achieved a more fulfilling level of discourse.

This was evidenced by the comments participants made about realizing that they were working towards a common purpose, despite having apparently different projects:

> "We are all concerned with the same thing… as an organization we could get strength from feeling that the things we do are complementary" (P1);
> "I thought perhaps you'd be up here [gestures at top of head level]…but it's worked out better than I thought" (P2);
> "I was wondering 'are we going to get anywhere out of this?';
> I'm absolutely amazed at the… actually, the commonality of what we're talking about here" (P4).

However, despite the apparent political 'neutrality' of the discussion, there were several aspects which revealed underlying power structures. On several occasions, for instance, the Head of Postgraduate Programmes assumed the role of 'master teacher', making comments which would not have been out of place in a postgraduate seminar. These contributed to constructive and facilitated learning, but appeared to be self-consciously Socratic in their nature:

> "It's a very interesting question, X";
> "It seems what you did there is really quite an interesting way of going about this…" (P4).

There was also a sense that, as line manager and as researcher, I had orchestrated both the proceedings of the set and the projects which colleagues had taken on, and this pointed to evidence of the distorting effect of the researcher. Although the three colleagues other than myself who presented had made a free choice as to their projects, two were clearly linked to appraisal targets (which I myself had been involved in setting). Although it was clear to me that I must remain alert to the effects of my intervention, it was difficult to prevent them. However, it would be essential to be vigilant in reporting this throughout the case study.

An approach to analyzing the data began to emerge from the transcription process. I began by noting the critical moments in the set meeting in terms of apparent shared or individual insight, turning points in the direction and structure of the discourse, and the use of specific language to reveal underlying attitudes and values which might shed light on the organizational culture of the School.

However, what emerged as interesting and worthwhile was unpredictable, and produced some surprising instances of richness. The following extract illustrates this point, and highlights the need to keep an open mind when transcribing and analysing:

> (ending a discussion on the customer service role fulfilled by staff in an Ibis hotel, where she had been investigating the reality behind the company's '15-minute satisfaction promise') "They all do everything" (P2);
>
> "It seems what you did there… is really quite an interesting way of going about this… I don't know whether you've gathered any evidence…. If Paul would allow it, to go [to the College reception to observe the frontline welcome for new students] and just sort of, shadow people…. Just sort of, follow them through… the entrails of the College until they get to us…I think the student perspective on this would be absolutely fascinating… Get them on tape" (P4);
>
> "You could do that for a range of different learners" (P1);
>
> "I guess there is a difference, of course, between hotel customers and students" (F);
>
> "That reminds me of a rephrasing of my question: What kind of a customer are you?" (P3).

This provides a good example of colleagues listening effectively, building dialogue constructively around a suggestion for what P2 might do next to investigate her project. The fact that P4, the Head of Postgraduate Programmes, conceives of the project as a rich source of research data, and talks overtly in

these terms, is an example of ways in which – if more colleagues adopted this perspective - skills and behaviours in the School might change over time as it moved towards becoming more of a learning organization. It remained to be tested, through the participant interviews, how this idea struck the problem-owner (P2) on reflection over time.

In practical terms, since it was at that stage too early to know which passages of transcription would turn out in time to be significant in the life of the set, it was important to have codified and annotated the transcript as it stood, in a way which would make it accessible in future. I had every expectation that as my reading and experience deepened, I would develop greater expertise in making use of the transcripts of each set meeting.

In relation to the literature, there were several instances in what participants said which appear to support some of the claims made for action learning by McGill and Beaty (1995). For instance, the authors claim:

> "...the important thing is that the project is not one where the end point and the stages in between are clearly mapped out in advance" (1995: 23).

The initial choice of projects in all cases fitted this requirement – there were no detailed action plans in place for the respective colleagues' activity, and the projects offered considerable potential for taking shape as discussion continued both within and beyond the set.

One participant experienced a turning-point in thinking about his project as one which might lead to the creation of

> "...learning spaces where people can convene to discuss new ideas, instead of going on staff development" (F).

Another noted:

> "This is a new idea that's popped out of the discussion this afternoon"(P4).

Concluding on action to implement before the next set meeting, a third said:

> "That gives me quite a few things to work on" (P2).

These are good examples of McGill and Beaty's point that:

> "Most people find that the project transforms under the scrutiny of the set" (1995: 29).

McGill and Beaty also recognize (1995: 24) that developmental activity is often limited by lack of time for reflection, lack of impetus for action, and lack of theoretically-inspired thinking. These were recurrent themes in participants' comments.

The Sequence of Five ALS Sessions, February – June 2006

In the main run of ALS sessions, the project themes selected by the ALS members represented a similar range to that seen in the pilot session of May 2004. Although there were two new set members, and the professional context had changed for the existing members, interests remained diverse yet focused on primary tasks which were centrally important to the work of each member over the timespan of the ALS. Choices made were therefore appropriate, and to some extent instrumental.

The grids in the Appendices provide an overview of the ways in which each participant, to differing extents, developed a sense of learning how to conceptualise and deal with the sort of issues and dilemmas they faced at the start of each set.

Appendix 2 records how each set member voiced these problems as questions to their ALS colleagues. Interpretive comments in the table highlight themes which are explored further in the narratives presented later for some of the individual characters in the story.

Appendix 3 provides a similar broad overview and analysis of the actions which each participant agreed at the end of each Set meeting.

This section also provides introductory frameworks for reporting data in order to establish, across the completed sequence of set meetings, the key questions posed and actions taken by each of the six set members. It will be seen that only one set member attended all the ALS sessions, and that this was the researcher.

Set Membership and Participation

The following pattern resulted over the complete sequence of ALS meetings:

ALS Meeting No.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**Gender of participant**
P1 (Senior Lecturer/Head of Short Courses)	✓		✓	✓	✓		M
P2 (Administrative Assistant)	✓	✓	✓		✓		F
P3 (Dean of School/ *the researcher*)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	M
P4 (Head of Postgraduate Programmes)	✓	✓			✓	✓	M
P5 (Recently-appointed Lecturer)		✓	✓		✓		M
P6 (Senior Lecturer)		✓	✓	✓		✓	F

Fig. 4.2 Participation in the ALS sessions by individually-coded member and post within the School

Absences are explained by the difficulty in the life of the School in fixing meetings of any description due to the work patterns of colleagues, who frequently travel overseas to undertake training or consultancy assignments. There is a working year which is neither constrained by British public holidays nor by the traditional academic year, meaning that annual leave must be taken

opportunistically. There is therefore an accepted tradition that there will be significant absences from most events, and the ALS was no exception. It was made clear before inviting set members to join that there was no requirement to attend every session. However, it was pleasing to note that no set member failed to attend an ALS session when they were present in the institution, despite work pressures which were noted in the transcripts on several occasions.

There was no pattern of drop-out over the sequence of meetings, and all members participated over a time-span no shorter than five meetings. The fact that only the researcher (and line manager of all other participants) attended all six meetings might arouse suspicion, suggesting that the dates for ALS sessions were set primarily at his convenience. This highlights the need for constant vigilance to the danger of researcher bias noted in Burgess et al (2006: 88), and for the agreement of transcripts with each of the participants before carrying out final analyses – especially crucial since the individual memories of each individual were by definition at best partial, as was borne out by the semi-structured interviews.

The Experience in ALS Sessions 2 and 3

As with the first ALS, members were surprised in sessions 2 and 3 to find that they gained new insights into their projects by virtue of the format of the sessions. These were clearly not like meetings, they involved high-quality professional dialogue, and they assisted participants in understanding the challenges faced by colleagues.

Many set members were interested in the extent to which the ALS enabled a different sort of discourse to that of meetings:

> "…what's struck me is the notion of and the reality of conversation. All of the things that you're doing are about initiating or taking part in conversation…" (P4);
> "That fifteen minutes that's focused on you is really important… What for me is a key motivation… we've all got

goals that we need to meet, it's… I think listening to what other people are saying, and hearing the suggestions that have run out, and then in the recap – what people have come up with – I'm sitting and thinking 'Yeah, you can do that, and it'll be great for you to come back and I *expect* you to come back. That counts for me too…. So I've found that very motivating" (P5);

"It's very good for me to be here, to come in here without interruptions for a couple of hours…" (P2);

"I'm not sure whether I shall, erm, manage to do any of the things that we've been talking about, though I'm certainly going away inspired, feeling that there's some support around. Thank you very much" (P6).

In comparison with School meetings, where a tendency to 'whinge' against College management decisions and behaviours was a notable characteristic, the ALS engendered a sense of using precious time to best possible effect.

"A feeling of almost sacred professional space – we fire off each other's project ideas" (P3).

There was a growing sense of awareness by ALS members of the ways in which the quality of the dialogue might be enhanced by, for instance, focusing more on putting questions to problem presenters rather than suggested solutions.

"I've a feeling that as we go on in a sequence… it'll be interesting to see how different we get at behaving as participants in this. Are we going to be focusing on questions; we've been offering quite a bit of advice?" (P3).

There were occasions on which perceptions of power balance surfaced, with 'difference' being identified between academic and administrative staff:

(in response to being asked what was worrying her) "I think possibly in the way people perceive you because I've been

> just purely an administrator for years… I'm trying to bring a bit more to it as well, so that they don't think… that they've sent someone who pushes bits of paper around" (P2).

There was interesting scope for analysing over time (through the complete sequence of ALS sessions) the extent to which discourse varied according to the different stages of each session: feeding back on actions, presenting new issues and discussing them, proposing future actions and feeding back on the processes of the ALS itself – all have different patterns of dialogue and interaction associated with them. The participants were becoming increasingly interested in the extent to which they were 'getting better' at action learning.

In terms of longitudinal tracking, it was also interesting to see how each ALS member's role changed over time, as the set gained experience of collaborative working. Whether there would be an effect of the novelty of the ALS experience wearing thin, or whether frustrations and tensions emerged between set members, remained to be seen.

A concern for the researcher, in its potential impact both on the validity of the research, and on the ethical dimension, lay in the extent to which my ability to project my knowledge (derived through the reading required for the Doctorate) into the workings of the ALS might distort the process and outcomes of the set. This recalls Fenwick's analysis (2003), and her view that managers tend to manipulate organizational learning processes to suit their own ends.

On analysing the transcript of my own contributions to the first two ALS sessions, I was aware that on occasion, I took opportunities to present ideas as having emerged as if spontaneously from the set discussion, whereas I had in fact planned them in advance. This applies to wondering if participants would become more open in their use of questions to challenge their colleagues (because I expected this to develop in line with theoretical writing in the literature). It also emerged on one occasion when I discussed proposed future action:

> "It struck me that doing some kind of survey as an instrument for seeing where we are..." (P3).

This was in fact already in my proposed plans for the research project, and to suggest that it had emerged from the ALS discussion did not reflect the degree of opportunism which I had employed. There would be a constant need to be vigilant in this respect as the project developed.

A number of ideas emerged from analysing the data which suggested particular categories of what might be termed 'discourse interventions' by the participants. Typical examples are represented in the figure below.

Category of intervention	***Example***	***Location***
Confessional	"But that also means me letting go a little bit more and that's a little bit of a problematic area for me actually handing over, because [the students] may not arrive at the conclusions that I want and they may not get the information that I want and then if it all goes pear-shaped, how do I pull it all back together in a sense? That's my little bit of anxiety in a sense. I'm a bit of a control freak, yeah."	P6, ALS2
Empathetic	"You know a lot about schools because of your own kids, don't you, and because you know all about what happens to the students on placement there."	P6, ALS3
Supporting	"I had a similar worry about perceived lack of experience. But if they see that you've been sent there, they know that's because people here think you can do the job."	P5, ALS3
Challenging	"But what would you like students to be saying about the techniques and approaches you used? Is there anything they might have learned?"	P3, ALS2
Clarifying	"So what you want is to get students to be more active, by you being less didactic, getting them to do more themselves? Is that it?"	P5, ALS2

Fig. 4.3 Emergent discourse intervention categories from ALS2 and 3

As more transcripts became available, it was likely that the frequency and variety of these interventions would expand, and that a rich spectrum of subtle

distinction might emerge within each category. Expanded examples can be found in the Thematic Analysis towards the end of this Chapter.

It was evident that the context of professional educational development in which the participants worked gave the ALS a head start compared to some settings in which action learning has been used. It was noticeable in this case, for instance, that there was overlap between the skills needed for successful teaching, training and consultancy and those which lead to positive outcomes in action learning. This may affect any generalisability of the findings, and caution will therefore be needed in this aspect of analysing the data.

Data Analysis and Case Study Write-Up

This section presents linear narratives of the involvement of four ALS members over the course of the set meetings each attended during the total period of the research study. The analysis will offer some explanation building, and will comment on evidence found in the data to support or refute the research proposition that action learning contributes overtly to the development of an organizational culture in which distributed, learning-informed leadership is a dominant characteristic.

The Apprentice's Story

P5 joined the School of INTED in October 2004, at the point of graduating from the School's own Master of Education programme in Trainer Development. This followed many years of teaching experience, and 3 years' work with Voluntary Service Overseas in Laos, where he had developed the skills of teacher training in a context which presented multiple challenges, and had clearly provided a great deal of stimulation. P5 had excelled as a Masters student on a course in the School of INTED (on which I had taught, and for which he gained a Distinction), bringing a critical perspective to the programme, as well as personal warmth, good humour, and a youthful

demeanour which was much-needed in the School, where the average age of academic staff was at least 15 years above P5's thirty-seven years.

In the first year of his appointment, he had expressed some disappointment that the work he was assigned to had not been as challenging as he expected. It was relatively piecemeal, and involved spending only short periods of time on projects based in developing-world settings – often interspersed with what he considered to be 'workload fillers': teaching on language classes and short intensive home-based teacher training courses.

ALS 2 (3rd March 2006)

P5 joined the ALS for its second meeting (about 16 months after being appointed) with some insights into what to expect, which came from experiential sessions which had introduced Action Learning in one of the modules on the M.Ed.

He was able to use ALS2 to make a 'position statement' on this to fellow set members:

> "I feel that I'm working with teachers and people in education kind of in the ivory tower, and I'm finding that a little bit.... frustrating... very frustrating... I would like to get a bit more dirty... we discuss uncertainty, but we don't necessarily face it with these teachers in the work they're doing."

Specifically, P5 was referring here to a new project in Djibouti for which he had sole responsibility. He had found his first overseas visit motivating, having successfully carried out an initial needs analysis, but was feeling exasperated at being at a distance from the participants once back in the UK.

Having introduced his dilemma, he was able to ask for responses from set members by saying,

"I'd be interested in anyone's ideas around how that might be managed…I'd just like to ask people what they think of that… similar thoughts, ideas".

When colleagues then attempted to clarify what P5 meant in terms of the frameworks they themselves were comfortable with (those which encouraged him to conceive of his project in *research* terms), he resisted. When P6 hinted at the need for "triangulation" in P5's approaches, there was a long silence, followed by tentatively-worded and unconvincing:

"Those are strategies I could use… I'm sure".

This appeared to be a sign of P5 feeling uncomfortable in adjusting to the professional norms of his role of lecturer in higher education, compared to the more overtly-practical orientation of his former post as field-based teacher trainer. It was only when P3 suggested that looking at the project from the perspective of *evaluation* that P5 recovered the confident register in which he had begun his 15-minute slot as presenter:

"Yes, I hadn't thought about it in these, er…(Long silence)…
I think with what we're doing… I do… like that idea – yes."

This is a good example of the moments of insight which occurred at least once in each set meeting (and on several occasions can be recorded in each person's slot in a set meeting). In reflecting at the end of ALS2 on the process of the session, P5 comments powerfully:

"That 15 minutes that's focused on you is really important…
what for me is a key motivation… we've all got goals that we need to meet, it's I think listening to what other people are saying, and hearing the suggestions that have run out and then in the recap – what people have come up with – I'm sitting here and thinking 'Yeah, you can do that and it'll be great to come back and I expect you to come back'. That counts for me, too. I know that I'm going to be able to come back…

> with the same group – and say 'this is where I'm coming from'. So I've found that very motivating."

This contribution shows the affective shift which P5 has experienced within two hours, from "very frustrating" to "very motivating". He has noted the strength of the ALS format to achieve what no business meeting can ("That 15 minutes"), and to build in a sense of commitment to action which is perceived as a commitment to the other set members. It is as though he feels that, during the course of discussion, he has been able to contribute to shaping the departmental culture he belongs to, and feels greater self-confidence than he did at the start of the session.

At an earlier stage in ALS2, while P5 was contributing to discussion during P3's slot, he made a comment about the difficulty in re-entry to departmental life for those returning from overseas:

> "We go out but when we come back, there's nothing happening inside."

He then articulated his perceived need for creating a format for "a sharing meeting" between colleagues, since when the academic staff met over lunch breaks, there was deliberate avoidance of work issues:

> "...tremendously strong sense of team – we're not cashing in on it at a professional level."

By the time P3 had agreed to act to create a format and a starting date for the "sharing meetings", the commitment to the set members had been made – and this affirmative response to P5's perceived need may well have contributed to P5's feedback comments on feeling motivated.

At other moments in ALS2, P5 contributed using appropriate skills, such as asking challenging questions to P2 about whether she was looking to "grow" new relationships in her work in the USA, and to P6, for whom he skillfully

paraphrased and echoed back the issues she had raised in order to tease out further perceptions from P6.

However, at other times, P5 acted as a more-typically inexperienced set member, offering suggestions and giving advice instead of eliciting ideas from set colleagues. There was one interchange with P6, when after offering help in devising Web Quest teaching and learning activities, P5 delivered a long monologue on the virtues of this form of learning task. This is perhaps an interim stage towards the realisation that P5 articulates in his reflective comments above, although it should be noted that even here, he may have misunderstood the purpose of the ALS, as he uses the word "suggestions", as though this were a legitimate function of the set.

ALS3, 24th March 2006

By the next set meeting, ALS3, some three weeks later, P5 had agreed to take on the role of facilitator, so would not be presenting in his own slot. This offered some fascinating opportunities to analyse P5's contributions in this capacity.

With two exceptions, P5's interventions in ALS3 were minimal and sensitive to the needs of set colleagues. Appropriate shaping and challenging questions were put on the rare occasion when these were not forthcoming from other set members:

> (To P1) "What does a course consist of – and how might that change? Is this about 'Let's get out of the classroom'?";
> (To P3) "To what extent is this about your own job satisfaction?";
> "Through my eyes, for example – what might be different [in two years' time]?".

This final question is interesting, as it indicates that P5 was thinking in terms of having a long-term future in the School of INTED, and appeared to have no pre-conceived idea of what was to happen over the following two months.

The exceptions to P5's appropriate modelling of the 'classic' facilitator role (as outlined in Chapter 2) were valuable in their own way. On one occasion, unable to resist offering some expert knowledge to P1, who was exploring his own thoughts on motivating extra-mural activities for his students, P5 provided examples of a contact person and published case study on which P1 might be able to draw. Although this took up a short time in P1's slot, this was perceived by the other set members as a constructive intervention.

The other occasion provided a useful insight into P5's perceptions of the School of INTED's culture, and of the middle management role of the Dean (P3) in leading it in spite of top-down forces from senior management:

> "I imagine it's a difficult time right now, because basically what you're having to do is not change gear, but you're going to almost reverse the direction of the engines of our culture in INTED, because for so long it's been about survival, it's been about reacting to... reacting to what's been out there... it's been if you like a passive culture of hold onto what we've got. Now... what you're trying to introduce or to facilitate is a culture of actually starting things... I think that's really difficult."

P5 concluded shortly afterwards by asking whether or not there was a shared vision, about whether or not it was a question of:

> "...where I want to be, or how can we put into this process?"

This was not the sort of reflection which would have been likely to surface in a staff meeting, or any other kind of group encounter in the School, and proved helpful in taking P3's discussion slot further. Although this was a monologue-like intervention from P5, it did enable the ALS to move forwards – and this was presumably achieved through the concluding focus on a question. There may have been a sense in which P5 felt that his intervention was justified

because the piece of discourse ended with a developmental question, almost a notion that a final question was a means of 'buying' speaking time in the set.

At the end of ALS3, P5's conclusions may have contained an element of self-congratulation, but he nevertheless felt that the ALS members were learning more successfully how to participate:

> "I felt it was far more exploratory… it had all been about asking questions. I felt there was a fundamental difference in the level of the discussion."

ALS5

The next time P5 joined the set, there was an emotional charge in the air. This was at the beginning of May, following a staff meeting at which colleagues in INTED had been informed by P3 that the College Principal had declared that he wanted P3 (as Dean) to prepare a business plan which assumed that one third of academic staff in the School would have left within one year, with a further reduction the following year. This had produced a mixed effect of despondency and determination to fight, although its overall effect on morale was clearly problematic.

Nevertheless, the experience of ALS5 was one of a galvanising process, in which the force of action learning manifested itself clearly. It was as though the adversity had heightened the propensity for constructive thinking. For P5, there was an interesting pattern of involvement. At the start of the session, P5 reported that he had decided to change the focus of his project, away from the overseas work in Djibouti, and on instead to a new module for which he was preparing in the next academic year.

During the first presenter's slot, P5 played a constructive role, asking a shaping question which boosted the presenter's ability to move towards deciding on actions, and also played the role of active listener by making supportive noises such as "Mm", "Yes…" and "No…".

When it came to P5's own slot, he had a clear position on his thinking about the new module which he was able to put succinctly. Instead of focusing the module, about teaching in challenging circumstances, on issues of pupil behaviour or lack of resources, he had decided to look at

> "Being a teacher… how you operate in a community… personal relationships, time management… I can make it fit… What do others think? Because we all work in a community here and so, you know, what things help you work in… a professional community?"

Before opening up the discussion, P5 concluded by asserting the sense of shared cultural and educational values which existed among the professional community of the School of INTED. Here, it is as though P5 (and other set members) were more ready to draw on their shared values when experiencing a crisis. The workings of ALS5 were a clear case of Hemingway's 'grace under pressure'. The immediate response to P5's opening question, for instance, was from P1, who summarised what P5 was thinking as two separate questions.

P5 immediately responded, with confidence and a clear sense of knowing what he expected the set process to concentrate on, with:

> "Let's focus on the latter".

During later discussion, P5 was happy with a number of ideas which surfaced, noting for example that

> "I like that idea of loyalty [to a professional community]."

Towards the end of P5's slot, there was a more poignant moment which built on the earlier idea of the shared community under threat:

> "We haven't been institutionalised in a College sense…" (P4);
>
> "No, no, quite, in our own little…" (P2);
>
> "In our own little bubble…" (P4);

"Yeah, indeed." (P2);

"Which could now very shortly be punctured" (P4).

For a considerable time, P5 became silent, as though a thought were sinking in, a thought which the actions of the next few weeks might shed light on.

Later on, P5 recovered his sense of energy, responding vigorously to the ideas and suggested actions which came from P3's slot:

> "Today, just hearing this, I feel quite excited about that... It's about us, rather than about the College... I personally think that particular suggestion... is good".

Despite the fact that this is not the kind of judgemental comment which is considered appropriate in action learning, it does indicate the extent to which P5 was enjoying the session. This was corroborated by his concluding feedback, coming after committing himself to three specific actions involving undertaking research investigations in support of the new module:

> "It's been really useful... I think this is a particularly useful forum for discussing something like developing a new module. Not only in the ideas that are given, but I've found it particularly useful to see how you reacted to my idea... in terms of 'Ooh, that's an exciting idea'. ...I think that that was echoed in how I felt that we responded to [P3]'s suggestion. So what I've found interesting in this, is that it's not just about support, because we all support each other, and in a good Action Learning Set that's something that comes out of an Action Learning Set because we're there for each other – it's voluntary... But I think that the emotional response that came back I think is something that was really useful... it gives you confidence to... carry on and do what you're doing".

He added later,

> "I still think that the people within the Set are the key, rather than the Action Learning Set itself".

Here, a large number of issues are revealed in a concentrated piece of discourse. After taking part in only three ALS sessions, P5 still has not fully grasped some of the fundamental tenets of action learning. In his use of "the ideas that are given", "suggestion" and "reacted", there is still a notion of expertise and advice being provided by other group members. Although P5 is not alone in this perception, his involvement in a small number of sessions may account for his limited understanding of the purpose and function of the group.

There is clearly evidence to suggest that P5 has found the ALS to be a motivating experience ("really useful", "gives you confidence"), and that he has experienced it affectively in ways which perhaps surprised him ("the emotional response that came back").

However, one key point that P5 did not realise at the time of ALS5 was that he would not be taking part in future sessions, nor that his agreed actions would soon become redundant. At the start of the following academic year (four months later), P5 was no longer employed in the institution. Within three weeks of ALS5, he had agreed a voluntary severance package with the College which meant that the School of INTED had lost its youngest academic member, and that its notions of succession planning had suffered a major setback.

The Administrator's Story

P2 had worked in the School for over fifteen years when the ALS started. Since ALS1, she had taken on new responsibilities within her post, provoked by the departure of a colleague who was not replaced. By ALS2, she was preoccupied in particular with a range of tasks associated with her coordination of international study opportunities, including visits to and from partner universities in the USA. As a result, she had a well-defined project which ran across the three remaining ALS sessions she attended (2, 3 and 5). A first

overseas working visit had been scheduled to take place between the last two of these sessions, and required careful planning. In many ways, P2's project was the most successfully-supported of all the participants' projects by the action learning process, although P2 developed fewer of the skills of being a supportive participant to projects of others, as will be seen here.

ALS 2

At the outset, on being asked by the facilitator to share anticipated outcomes for the session, P2 presents confidence as a theme:

> "I need to sort of get more confident in my job role."

The word 'confident' is used three times in her opening sentences. During the presentation slot of another colleague (P5), P2 makes a perceptive and valuable comment which demonstrates critical awareness – about the limitations of reliability of course participant self-evaluations. Nevertheless, she prefaces her comment with perceived lack of self-confidence:

> "(Laughs) Coming from a non-academic background…."

Further lack of confidence is clear at the start of P2's slot, when she appears uncertain as to how to relate the purpose of the ALS to the achievement of agreed appraisal targets. Given the circumstance that P3 was line manager to all participants, P3 had been responsible for agreeing appraisal targets with all of them in the months preceding ALS2. P2 appears to defer to P3 in introducing her issues, suggesting some discomfort with dealing with the presence of the hierarchical leader:

> "Some of the issues I've already sort of discussed in my appraisal."

On the other hand, this comment may also signal that P2 feels at ease in discussing personal and professional development issues not only with her line manager, but with other colleagues who represent a wide range in the departmental hierarchy. She presents her key issues in terms of fear and uncertainty:

"I don't know what else I need really... 'cause this is going to be my first trip overseas... first time on my own abroad. I just need my confidence building up basically... it's a bit scary, really, but I'm feeling excited about it as well."

The discussion is skillfully shaped by the other participants, using different tactics:

- consultancy-type questions ("What's worrying you?" [P3])
- empathetic statements ("I had a similar worry about lack of experience" [P5])
- suggestions for skills and techniques which could be developed (discourse tactics in one-to-one meetings, presentation techniques)

During the remainder of the session, P2 contributes small individual suggestions to others. However, in the action-setting slot, she proves extremely adept at coming up with a succinct statement of her intended actions which incorporate all the ideas generated during her slot:

"Right, I think what I'm going to do is... start to plan what actually I want to get out of that visit to each institution..."

This is reinforced with a certain sense of wonder by the facilitator (P4):

"This emerged out of this meeting..."

In giving her feedback on the process of ALS2, P2 is particularly appreciative of the notion of the ALS providing high-quality discussion time:

"It's certainly helped me focus my mind, anyway, and it's brought up a lot of things about what I need to do in a very short period of time... It's very good for me to be here, to come in here without interruptions for a couple of hours..."

For a frontline administrator, this aspect of uninterrupted time is crucial.

ALS3

For P2, this did not constitute a full session, as she was literally preparing to leave for the USA within a few hours, and asked for her slot to be brought forward in order to enable her to leave afterwards. As a result, the slot relates to issues about which she is feeling "very nervous". When asked to clarify this further, she states a worry about working with Deans and other senior academics, but then reveals that she is particularly concerned about dealing with a specific colleague in a partner institution:

> "...one very strong person and I've had to be very firm with her already."

She then comments that in her view men tend to be less forceful in dealing with than women – a statement perhaps of underlying relational issues within the School?

The discussion then focuses on discourse tactics, using a lunch which has just taken place with visiting US academics as an informal case study. P2 leaves the session appearing somewhat reassured, and proposing devising a plan for follow-up to the visit as her action for the next time.

ALS5

By the time of the next session, P2 is able to report back with a sense of triumph that:

> "It all went well in the US – I won't worry about doing that again."

She reports back in a balanced manner about one or two critical incidents, and expresses two key concerns when it comes to her own slot. Firstly, how to gain responses from US contacts now she has returned:

> "I just wonder how, er, often I should be pestering these people... how often do I keep hammering the nail on trying to work my way around these things?"

Secondly, she is concerned over how to address improvements needed to the functionality of the College's website – with some deference to P3 as Dean:

> "I need to find a way of making this happen… it's not something I think that… I couldn't do on my own… I'm gonna need – Paul's working on that as well, really, from the sort of, the managerial side of things, I think…"

Once again, although the starting-point appears to be specific pragmatic issues, the other participants tease out underlying issues, eliciting the desired outcomes P2 seeks, and the required actions (by herself or others) which would enabled these to transpire. At the end of her slot, P2 generates a long list of ideas, all of her own suggestion, which demonstrates the 'classical principles' of action learning.

As supporter in other participants' slots, P2 is also on form in ALS5. She is much more confident than previously in sharing her experience, and is no longer in any way apologetic in her discourse. She raises a point of political awareness in relation to the planning of the June 2006 awayday – and the possible reaction of senior managers - where she asks perceptively,

> "Will anyone know what we've done while we're away?"

At the end of the session, after proposing clear actions for herself, P2 comments on the value of the dynamics of small groups, which she likes, and on the importance of learning about the projects of others:

> "I learn a lot about things that I never really knew about… you find out things from other people."

Here, although P2 could not attend ALS6, P2 talks as though she has now become a member of something permanent and sustainable, and of which she appears to expect to remain a member.

The Reader's Story

Six months before the 2006 sequence of the ALS sessions, P4 was awarded the title of Reader in recognition of his significant contribution at national and international levels to his discipline. In many ways, P4 could lay claim to being the most senior 'lead learner' in the School – if not in a managerial sense, then as the leading exponent of learning and teaching methodology in his field, and as author of a number of books on classroom management in language teacher education. As a postgraduate tutor of almost twenty years, P4 had developed complex and challenging modules on the School's taught Masters programme, and had read significantly on organizational learning, and specifically on action learning. He therefore came to the ALS with well-informed expectations, and with an innate fascination with the learning processes involved in the ALS experiment.

For these reasons, the 'voice of the expert' is never far away in P4's contributions to the ALS sessions, sometimes accompanied by a sense in which he was conforming to his peers' expectations – including those of the researcher – by adopting the position of seasoned commentator on the proceedings. This turned out to be an irresistible temptation when other participants' topics touched directly on P4's areas of expertise.

<u>ALS2</u>

P4 continued throughout the sessions he attended to develop his focus on reflective learning, which was highly relevant to the process of the ALS itself. In ALS2, he took the role of facilitator, and was highly adept at forging links between one presenter and another, and at monitoring the timing of each slot. He offered only occasional suggestions, and skilled shaping questions, such as (to P5):

> "Does it *only* have to be about…?"

As facilitator, P4 observes all the expected behavioural norms of the role, and is particularly enthusiastic in giving feedback on themes which emerge:

> "All of the things that you're doing are about initiating or taking part in conversation… The other thing that really struck me was the idea of finding out or getting people to find out. "

He has also clearly appreciated the unique opportunities afforded to the facilitator, and presumably enjoyed the relatively rare experience of not having to be cast in the role of tutor:

> "…it's quite a privileged position to be in to hear everything that everyone else is doing, and to process all of that and just simply have the luxury of only having to process it. If you ever sit in this seat, it's a very nice seat to sit in."

ALS5

Here, P4 is fairly passive in the first presenter's slot (P2). He uses his expert authority to restate the presenter's points in summary on one occasion, and gives phatic support as she speaks, with background interjections such as "Mm, no" and "Exactly!"

When P2 offers a comment on the College's website, this triggers momentary comments on one of P4's hobby-horses, though he returns to supporter mode immediately afterwards:

> "I think it goes beyond that… there's a cultural issue here…I think institutionally we have over the years been very bad at advertising what we do."

However, when P5's slot arrives, P4 becomes much more involved, and takes on a tutor role as he engages enthusiastically with the topic, and makes a range of suggestions, preceded by comments such as "Quick idea…"

When P5 begins to discuss the notion of professional learning communities, a subject dear to P4, this elicits a diversionary comment about a former member of INTED staff he has met recently:

"...she was still pining for what was termed 'the collaborative working principles' of this place, and she had not found it in the place she'd ended up at... it's not a very nice place to work in: nobody talks to each other, nobody listens to each other."

While this conversation has moved away significantly from what is supposed to happen according to the 'classical principles' of an ALS slot, it appears nevertheless helpful to P5, and no action is taken by the (inexperienced) facilitator to intervene.

When P3 asks some challenging questions of P5, about emergent professional learning communities and the extent to which these can be nurtured by leaders, it is, interestingly, P4 who answers! Shortly after this, P5's time slot comes to an end.

The following slot is P3's and again the topic (of planning to make the June awayday a success, despite the gloomy prospects for the School) interests P4. Although P4 engages conversationally with P3 during the early part of the slot, he proves adept at turning an apparently philosophical point into a productive challenge. Initially, P4 cannot resist offering political comment:

> "What are the ways in which we can turn a crisis into an opportunity? That's the management trick... There isn't a consistent and specific attack... it changes... it's highly unpredictable... you know, how can we deal with unpredictable circumstances and still get some satisfaction from our daily work?"

As the discussion proceeds, P3 is able to put forward some creative ideas:

> "Let's just think completely outside the box for a moment."

P3 then proposes a 24-hour simulation exercise for the awayday, and concludes that it would be "an imaginative task to set up and plan something like this."

At this moment, P4 is elated, and emphasizes that his intervention has had the intended effect:

> "This is what I was getting at… you've just come up with it!"

The sense of having mastered part of the action learning process is palpable at this moment – it is as though the group is acknowledging its own 'becoming' as a Set.

In P4's own slot, however, he is unable to exploit fully the 20-minute slot, as his own presentation lasts for 11 minutes. After relatively little questioning and challenging, there is no time left, and P4 concedes,

> "Okay – I've waffled away a lot."

Nevertheless, P4 is able to propose a specific action, and clearly feels positive about the experience of ALS5 in his reflections on the process:

> "…from a static gloom over me this morning… the sort of interaction just reminds me that it's a life beyond, if you like… it's what we do when we're working together… This sort of forum – you can come with as mad an idea as you want. I don't think it matters, because it'll be listened to and accepted and dealt with there and then… You can speak the unspeakable in a sense."

There is a sense in which the ALS meets an emotional need (possibly even spiritual, in the reference to "a life beyond") which cannot be fulfilled elsewhere in working life. On the other hand, this could be interpreted as the manifestation of a group of people in denial of the changes they are experiencing, and supporting each other in adversity – but possibly in a way which may not ultimately be productive.

ALS6, 2nd June 2006

P4 begins somewhat despondently by reporting that he has not carried out his action from ALS5, and that it has had to be delayed to the following term.

In the first slot, he puts forward a strong challenging question (to P3, about the planned simulation the following week):

> "Do we want to get a sort of edge into it… provoke a discussion of some sort and maybe provoke a bit of conflict? I'm just trying to tease out the assumptions that you're building into the mechanisms here."

His other contributions are similarly helpful. When his own slot comes, he once again talks for some time around his own ideas (though on this occasion the initial presentation takes up only 9 minutes), and concludes without putting any questions or issues. There are some enjoyable examples of P4's ability to engage and amuse his listeners, as in his portrayal of the imagined intervention by a media production company in capturing classroom teaching to store on the College e-learning platform, which becomes a comic *tour de force* in P4's hands:

> "This is gonna be, you know, the old thing with the boom mike, camera on bloody wheels moving about and all of that sort of stuff… [The director]'ll have his scarf wrapped around his neck and he'll have his, his Homburg on, and he'll be sort of cracking the whip from his Director's chair: 'Oh, let's roll that one again, I've gotta see the rushes at five o'clock today'. I mean (laughs hilariously to himself), I mean that's the way he was talking! He said, 'Oh no, no, the best way to look at classrooms is to get it properly set up with good lighting.' I said, 'No, it isn't (laughs immoderately again), that's absurd".

Nevertheless, the other participants are able to challenge P4 to develop new ideas, and this is reflected in his ability to set actions, where he states,

> "I never even imagined this … it could be so productive."

In reflecting on the process, his final comments centre around the learning he has derived from experimenting with the action learning format:

> "By imposing a structure… you're more likely to get people to buy into it. It's very interesting. I've learnt that from this."

This theme of finding it important to have explicit drivers, imposed by the format, in order to bring about action is one which was emphasized to some extent by all participants at some stage. This is a professional learning community which can thrive, but one which requires self-imposed discipline in order to function.

In the semi-structured interview, P4 remembered in particular his fascination with the learning process in which the professional learning community was involved, and regarded this more highly than any aspects of project-related action which might have derived from the ALS:

> "… you are able to actually contribute to someone else's thinking or planning or progress. And that I found very very, er, valuable, and something of a revelation… even when facilitating it was still a very interesting process to take part in, just listening to what people were saying, and listening to all the interaction between people and seeing 'Yes, this is - you know, this is possible'. It is possible to build a… semi-formal network among a group of people, where they can actually find… common concern. In other words, it doesn't matter about the topic of what you're doing – it's the doing of it which is the issue. So I found that very, very interesting and sort of engaging with people professionally in a way that, that otherwise would have been impossible".

Affectively, P4 remembered his feelings at the end of each set:

> "I never felt tired at the end of it, in fact, I felt, sort of, strangely energised by it".

Finally, as lead researcher in the School, P4 made a sharp observation on the learning derived by participants by virtue of being involved in the research process:

> "... it actually became genuinely reflexive... , which for me was very interesting because it's... something I'm interested in on a professional level anyway, working with doctoral students... the real learning that goes on is not so much the creation of wonderful new ideas about whatever they're researching, but it's what they learn personally from the process about themselves, or more interestingly what their informants learn about themselves or learn about anything, from taking part in this higher-level process, which involves, as I say, standing outside and looking at what you're doing from a bit of a distance, and having other people looking at it from a distance. And I think it contributed to everybody's learning in the group, in small but significant ways".

This hints at some of the ways in which the project might have been enhanced had it been perceived, and undertaken by all participants, as an action research project.

The Leader's Story

<u>ALS2</u>

In this session, I was aware of wishing to present a model of lead learner in which I believed as 'espoused theory', and which I was anxious to turn into 'theory in practice'. I was thus keen to break down the feeling of power differential, and to show some vulnerability in my opening statement of expectations for the session:

> "The last year or two has been very difficult to actually make any progress... because of all the, sorts of, more survival-related issues..."

When my slot came, as P3, I was conscious of wishing to make value statements in order to help the other participants understand my rationale for proposing a project based around demonstrating more learning-centred leadership:

> "I always feel guilty that I spend such a small proportion of my time actually teaching, for example. So I try and get as much learning involved in what I'm doing as possible, erm, and try to kind of lead by example because I'm a strong believer in the idea of...leadership is something that naturally, amongst a group of professionals working together... is something that is naturally distributed because there's an awful lot of that in what people do and everybody is a leader in their own way, and particularly a leader of students and a manager of learning. I think that sense of people taking on the responsibility for learning in their own area is very strong here, but – I always feel that I should be doing more educational leadership. I'd like to think of more ways of... engaging more directly in the central tasks we're all involved in, which is supporting learning in different ways... we're too busy to focus on learning."

Nevertheless, at the end of presenting my project, I posed a relatively simple question which opened up some productive discussion:

> "... what could I be working on over the next four to six months... how can I be working to make sure that we can recover morale as a team of professionals?"

This is arguably an example both of a typical presenter approach to problematising an aspect of a project and at the same time an act symbolic of distributing leadership.

By the action-setting stage of ALS2, there is a sense that my thoughts have been further shaped by hearing the other slots. The notion that leading learning should be focused on impacting on student learning was one which had not surfaced in my own slot, but which became a recurrent theme during subsequent ALS sessions:

> "A whole set of new questions have been raised for me which I'd like to explore in future sets. From what [P6] was saying I think in particular the idea of student leadership, getting students to be more active, and to be sort of participants in the culture of the School in a more direct way."

There was also a sense in my reflection on ALS2 that the experience had somehow raised the aspirations of the group, in spite of tangible adversity:

> "[P6] was saying at the end of my slot a sentence about 'buzz' and 'exciting'. That's got to be the key, isn't it: to inspire that... in how we feel about our work as much as possible of the time. I guess that's how we all feel to some extent at some stage, but there's an overwhelming sense of feeling something else for quite a bit of the other times." (Laughter from the group)

My self-consciousness about being the researcher surfaced, too, in the feedback slot:

> "...it'll be interesting to see how different we get at behaving as participants in this. Are we going to be focusing on questions; we've been offering quite a bit of advice?"

I would not have said this had I not read substantially about action learning as the instigator of the set. However, I find it impossible to say whether or not I would have said it had I not been researching this as an action research project.

ALS3

Again, it is clear that I bring explicit knowledge about what I should be doing according to the 'classical principles' of action learning in stating my hopes for challenging questions in my slot:

> "I'd like to take away something that relates to my changing my behaviour in some way..."

I was aware at the time that I was intentionally modeling the kind of question I would like to see other participants putting, thus providing another example of action learning as a potential leadership tool.

Although the session ended with further technical reminders from me about the desirability of reducing presentation time and increasing the proportion of questioning, and about the number of sessions which remained to be recorded, I agreed with the other participants not to raise data-gathering or ethical concerns again during the session. As P5 put it, this

> "...would reduce the 'Hawthorne effect'."

ALS6

The issue of the extent to which the sessions had been genuinely challenging was raised again, and P6 questioned whether or not sets normally comprised close colleagues. She observed that if colleagues were close, resultant discussion might inevitably be "less challenging and more supportive".

I still showed evidence of acting as 'guardian' of the set, in that I was the only participant who had noted the agreed actions at the previous set, and was able to remind other participants of them. The question is posed as to how different the ALS sessions might have been if it had not been for the research project.

Thematic Analysis

In each of the following sections of the case study, the research propositions are matched to themes which emerge from the data, and an analysis is offered.

Individual Development

This thematic area emerged as the highest-yielding, in terms of evidence to support the achievement of expectations. Such expectations began from a high base, and there was no sense of skepticism or cynicism as to the processes of action learning at any stage. This may be explained by the voluntary nature of ALS membership, and by the professional culture of the School which was pre-disposed to supporting various manifestations of organizational learning.

Proposition 1: Action learning enables practitioners in higher education to change their practices.

There was a stated intent by some participants to change their practice:

> "I want to experiment, to do something different" (ALS2, P6);
>
> "I need to sort of get more confident in my job role" (ALS2, P2).

More specifically, P6 identified a need for change in her students' learning, and consequently her own practice in teaching:

> "I'd like them to be very active… and I think some of them take on a very passive role and I think that's one of the problems in a sense" (ALS2, P6).

By the end of ALS2, P6 has already planned for changes in her practice:

> "I'm going to… start at the end, I think… which you were making me do today, think about the products, what I want to have achieved at the end of the module" (ALS2, P6).

Having begun to implement her changes, she notes successful achievement, but then voices some uncertainty at the start of the next session, however:

> "I've got a little list of what I'm… I'm actually quite proud of having done…I don't know whether I've made it more

interesting or productive for them, and don't think I will know until…I see the kind of work that they produce" (ALS3, P6).

P1 also notes his specific intentions to change:

"This has been a very interesting conversation connecting to some of the things I'd like to do better" (ALS3, P1).

He lists these as more use of video-conferencing and other forms of ICT in his teaching, and more opportunities for students to develop their English language skills by working on projects in the community.

There is a sense for many participants that the constant iteration of ideas for change in their practice (and that of others) is in itself a factor which is responsible for successful implementation of change in practice, because it allows for critical reflection and peer evaluation:

"…reassurance that what I was doing was not totally mad or valueless… today's done the same… having to think about what I've done and what I've not done and actually list it – it's quite surprising the progress I've made. I probably wouldn't have done half of that if I hadn't kind of been motivated by my colleagues here" (ALS3, P6).

Indeed, there are many instances of the ALS format providing the incentive for converting intentions into actions:

"It's brilliant to be forced by the format of the set to have to do this research" (ALS4, P3);

"That notion of having contracts with yourself to do things can be very helpful" (ALS5, P3).

By ALS4, many participants were able to suggest multiple actions for themselves which were good examples of change in practice.

In the individual interview, P6 looked back on the ALS experience as a force for change in her practice:

> "I actually went in sometimes with less of a plan… and just let the sessions go sometimes where they, wherever they were gonna go, and that for me was quite scary, and it was quite a new thing for me to do… that's always been hard for me to do, and I did it - a little bit more, with, I think, the learning set giving me that permission in a sense, and that support… it has changed my practice a little bit, which I think is, is moving on in a way" (P6).

However, it must be said that other participants did not affirm that their practice had changed in the long-term (nor did they deny it). In reporting back on the achievement of actions, the data reveals numerous occasions when the action was completed only just before the next ALS session, and not always to the satisfaction of the participants concerned.

Nevertheless, there appears to be ample evidence in the data to corroborate this Proposition.

Proposition 2: There is intrinsic value in action learning in terms of team-working and related affective factors.

Again, there is considerable evidence to confirm the truth of this Proposition in the context of the research project.

Despite the overall perception that colleagues in the School worked as a team, it was acknowledged that prior to the ALS there had been limitations as to what was discussed and how. For instance, though many academic staff had lunch together at the same time every day, there was a deliberate avoidance of discussing work issues:

> "There's a tremendously strong sense of team – we're not cashing in on it at a professional level" (ALS2, P5).

Once the ALS got underway, P1 was particularly effusive as to the opportunities afforded by action learning:

> "I appreciate this opportunity to voice these things, because I've never said these things to anybody before... it's only by having a chance to talk them through that you start to make a shape of them" (ALS3, P1);
>
> "I don't have time to come to these meetings, but... it's valuable to hear about how other people feel about what they're doing... we need to have opportunities to open up about and not all be locked away.... I had a good time, but if I could afford it I'd be in therapy all the time anyway, so in the absence of it these kind of opening-up sessions I find really helpful" (ALS3, P1).

The concept of support from the group was also apparent in P6's initial expectations:

> "I shall be asking for lots of support and advice during the process, I'm sure" (ALS2, P6).

At the end of both her early ALS sessions, P6 expresses gratitude to the group as a whole, which supports the notion of a developing team experiencing a new process together:

> "Amazing. Thanks very much" (ALS2, P6);
>
> "Thank you. I always go away from these sessions thinking 'Oh, really good!' Why didn't we do this before?" (ALS4, P6).

P3 seems to view each ALS session as transformative in some way:

> "I can't believe how exhilarated I feel... it's amazing what's come out of it, and how I started with a complete blank" (ALS5, P3).

One interchange, in ALS4, is worth highlighting, as it shows discourse occurring which demonstrates the supportive team-building process in action:

> "I don't think anything I've got to say has any value… not of value in the sense of 'I'm going to put it there – out there' [in a blog]." (P6)
>
> "I think it's worth saying that all the things you come out with in these discussions have a tremendous value in themselves because of the thought that they bring about in other people. For example, when you're talking about your processes, that's when I get my ideas for next time." (P3)
>
> "I've felt the same way. Sometimes it's just the satisfaction/recognition… There's an element of chance in it. It's part of that reflective process that we don't do enough of…and sometimes it's easier to have somebody else to think with…" (P1)
>
> (P6 then proceeds to suggest some possible actions ahead of the next session)

In the individual interviews, P2 notes that she felt she learned to see others in a new way as an outcome of the ALS:

> "We gelled together as a group well, we - I think we learned to trust each other." (P2).

When asked in the interview to talk about her recollections of the ALS experience, P6 spoke immediately about affective factors:

> "I felt that it was very valuable. I liked the way it seemed to be a way of interacting with colleagues in a slightly different way to normal – then you saw a different side to people… and to do that without pressure… it was just so nice to sit down and spend a couple of hours uninterrupted and to be able to talk through professional things, and it was quite an eye-opener to find out what other colleagues were concerned

about... It was more of a pleasant dynamic than I'd expected."

All the evidence here refutes the supposition in Weinstein that action learning sets comprising members of the same organizational unit are undermined by

> "the likelihood of politics, rivalries or career concerns motivating the exchanges between set members" (2002: 15).

Proposition 3: Skills developed through action learning are transferable more widely across participants' working lives.

Although there are very few overt claims made by any of the participants for transfer of skills developed or lessons learnt into other aspects of their working lives, it is worth investigating the data to dig below the surface.

The one clear theme which does emerge is that of concern over mastery of what P1 describes as "that reflective process that we don't do enough of" (ALS4). It is as though all the members of this particular professional learning community feel that this is a crucial area of which they 'preach but do not practise' sufficiently:

> "I wanted to systematically record reflections – but I haven't done any at all... I really regret it – there were little insights and reactions that I didn't take the time to write down... How do other people...actually do that?" (ALS4, P6);
>
> "I wasn't going to say this because it sounds to me so trite for this kind of meeting, but you know some of the decisions that I've taken for next year: I'm gonna buy an exercise book... so that everything that currently goes down onto scraps of paper for the English Language course goes into there" (ALS4, P1).

The data suggests that the ALS is helpful in supporting greater reflexivity in professional life for the participants.

Two participants commented in the interviews that they had improved generic abilities:

> "I feel much more comfortable in… talking with people, being open with people… I found it very helpful to be operating in a kind of counselling role as it were and to practise these skills with colleagues, and to think about ways in which, er, they might be carried over into different aspects of my classroom work" (P1);
>
> " …it enables you… because it's right there in front of you… to try and step into somebody else's shoes – see what they're doing. See the sort of challenges they face. It makes you more tolerant" (P1).

P4 also felt that the ALS experience had helped to add to his teaching repertoire:

> "… one thing that has been a direct spin-off for me is that I've adopted a variation of this for teaching. So when I was in Pakistan last summer, teaching a module, erm, I was looking at different strategies of bringing staff together for development purposes and one of them was an action learning set".

Questions might be asked as to whether or not the period over which the ALS was held was long enough to sustain permanent change, or whether the institutional political pressures were too great to enable successful transfer of some skills which might have gone unacknowledged.

In addition, coaching skills were evident in the ALS transcripts. The notion of the importance of coaching skills to success in action learning is not one which has been identified in the literature, but seems in the wider context of the case study to have contributed significantly to successful learning, and to identification and achievement of actions. The following extract provides an example of coaching skills in action, in ALS5:

"Are there any wider questions behind that? What is it that you actually want to get – say the 'pestering people to get responses' one – what is it you would actually like to see resulting? Don't focus on the actual issue that appears to be the blockage, but what's the… the long-term view?" (P3);
(Impatiently) "The long-term issue is to try and get students here, basically. So…erm, I wanna know how I can get them to sell our product, as it were" (P2);
"What would they need to do to do that?" (P3);
"I think I need to get the manager to get in touch with me… to start some correspondence with me… how do I get this woman to respond to me?" (P2);
"So what's behind that? You can't order her to do anything" (P3).

P2 then proceeds to list several potential actions, using the challenging questions above as a catalyst to finding her solutions. In this sense, the questions are not 'academic' challenges in the sense that they are aimed at testing conceptual knowledge or understanding – they are coaching challenges aimed at bringing about self-directed changes in behaviour in the 'coachee' or participant in this context.

Proposition 4: Key learning takes place in an action learning set at points in participants' experience when the group has not yet become an established set.

The notion of 'becoming a set' was important throughout the period of recording and transcription. It could not truly be said that, after six sessions involving an average participation rate of 4.17 people per session (3.17 if the researcher is excluded), the attainment of full 'set-hood' had been realized.

Nevertheless, P4's recollections of the process, in the interview, are interesting:
"I don't think we were too good at it at the beginning – but I think, I think we got much better at sort of probing what other

people were doing, we learnt the questions to ask. We learnt the buttons to push. Erm, it didn't happen instantly, it was an evolving thing. There was a certain sort of erm, sense one gets from the literature that this all starts happening pretty quickly, you know, it's unproblematic, because it's always presented to you in its, you know, in its theoretical form, erm, it would be nice to see some case studies – see what actually happened."

There are instances in the data of the set trying to clarify what should happen at certain stages in each session, apart from those examples of checking with the researcher, which are reported in 'The Leader's Story' above. The following example is typical:

> "Are you looking for suggestions?" (ALS4, P1)
> "Well, no, I think I'm hoping that you'll help to challenge me further and get me to think of something which I'm not yet aware of" (ALS4, P3)
> (There follows a long silence).

It is from this kind of 'awkward' moment that learning derives. It could be argued that had the ALS sessions contained more frequent moments such as these, the notion of becoming a set might have become more complete.

P6 stated in the interview that she felt that the set could have achieved greater mastery of challenging:

> "We didn't always question as well as perhaps we should have, we ended up discussing sometimes, I think, and perhaps giving our opinions and our views rather than questioning… We needed a little more practice in… actually trying to do some structural questioning." (P6)

The journey towards 'becoming a set' maps interestingly onto the framework proposed by Rigg (2002) for various purposes or 'intents' which might underlie

action learning. In the case of the INTED ALS, there was an unintentional changed emphasis over time which was catalysed by the environmental factors which prevailed in the wider institution.

The ALS was originally individually-focused, with intents to improve performance (categorized by Rigg as 'performative') and to promote self-development (which Rigg calls 'emancipatory').

Over time, its focus changed to a social one, in which the performative and emancipatory intents was metamorphosing respectively into co-operative inquiry and critical action learning.

Leadership Learning

Proposition 5: Action learning enables distributed leadership within self-defined professional learning communities.

As demonstrated previously by the comments on 'collaborative principles' by P4, there was a longstanding sense of working as a team in the School before the ALS came about. Nevertheless, there is some evidence in the data that the participants developed different views on the notion of being in a professional learning community during the lifetime of the ALS. In early set meetings, this was deliberately introduced by P3, who took responsibility for the fact that there was little formally-recognized distribution of leadership in the School:

> "I sort of help to create people's workloads and therefore help to create some of the barriers that might get in the way of [a learning-centred] culture, so I'd be interested to know if there's anything I can do about changing, erm, my behaviour, or expectations or availability there for people, the patterns of interaction that, erm…" (ALS2, P3);
> "The job of leading or managing is a kind of, sort of… stewardship role which involves serving (spoken in a low voice, as though feeling self-conscious) the interests of the

people that you work with and that you manage – erm, and that tries to encourage people to do things in ways which they themselves are likely to – I suppose the assumption is, it's not necessarily a true assumption, it may be a false one: if I get some satisfaction out of doing things in a particular way, then I have some kind of responsibility to enable other people to get some opportunity to do the same thing" (ALS3, P3).

As the ALS proceeded, there were discussions on how a professional learning community might be defined in the School, which touched on the extent to which students were members of such a community. This raised doubts amongst some participants:

> "Students would be happy with the idea of being a co-worker – but not a peer. They like to feel a kind of…a certain amount of respect. They like to feel we're better than them in some way… students themselves might be uncomfortable with 'these people are my peers'…They might think we're mad" (ALS4, P6).

In the individual interviews, P6 particularly stressed the value of collaborative learning as she had experienced it in the ALS:

> "I learn better with colleagues… through a group situation… making that two-hour period when you've got a structure… that makes it more satisfactory somehow… finding a way which doesn't seem too formal" (P6).

Another School member (not a participant in the ALS) said in a brief interview conducted at the same time as the semi-structured participant interviews that he had perceived the ALS as a welcome manifestation of the opportunity for a wide range of staff to participate in the management of the department, a concept of which he was supportive.

In conclusion, the ALS appeared to realize concretely a latent sense of professional learning community in which taking responsibility for change in each participant's own area of work was crucial. The sense in which each participant became to some extent a researcher of his/her own practice through working with others in the ALS reinforced the sense of collaborative learning. It could be argued that this led to distributed leadership, although since this was never made explicit by the researcher, and not tested in the interviews, the empirical data offers at best only a glimpse of the realization of the Proposition.

Organizational Culture and Politics

Proposition 6: Action learning changes power relationships in the learning situation.

It has been noted above that existing power relationships continued to be acknowledged to some extent within the ALS (P4's power as authoritative 'knower'; deference to P3 as Dean). P3 did attempt early on to de-emphasize his position of power by acknowledging weaknesses early on, and this relates to the point made by P1 in the individual interview, reported in comments on Proposition 4.

Other interviewees also commented on subtle changes they had noticed in working relationships with set participants outside the set:

> "For people to say, 'I don't know what to do about this, I'm not sure what to do next' and asking for advice from people – I found that very positive, erm, but also looking at colleagues whom I respect greatly, erm, to feel that they, they needed support and advice from me and from the other people in the group – yeah, that was very positive" (P1);
>
> "She's... moved nearer to the academic staff mentally... she doesn't see herself simply as somebody clerical... and I think maybe the set was part of that shift. We've always worked well together, but – it does feel different with her" (P6).

Nevertheless, there is little evidence of significant change in power relationships, possibly due to the fact that in the life of the School, there was already a tangible sense of close, transparent and authentic working relationships in which 'power distance' was not as great as it might have been in, for instance, a commercial business.

Proposition 7: Action learning is unlikely, if practised in an isolated sub-culture, to have more than a limited impact on the culture of a higher education institution as a whole; indeed, it may conflict with institutional systems and structures.

Many of the writers reported on in the literature review have emphasized the danger of action learning being seen as subversive when applied only selectively in companies. In the context of higher education, this has not previously been tested. It is interesting that the evidence points significantly to the validity of the final clause of the proposition, concerning conflict with systems and structures.

This surfaced very early, given the timing of ALS2 exactly two months after the Academic Board meeting reported in Chapter 1. It was P3 who related his project directly to the notion of the conflict (others did not, and their projects were less directly linked to institutional issues) at the outset:

> "I'd like to get back to the core of something which I think relates to the values that we, er, that we all share. I feel there's a responsibility to, kind of, lead learning in the School that's in conflict with some of the more managerial roles that I'm expected to take on." (ALS2, P3)

Although this may have been seen as manipulative, it was felt by P3 to be important to be transparent and open from the start, since this was a real issue which affected his working life directly, and which he was keen to share constructively with colleagues.

There were comments from participants about the impact of the institutional pressures for downsizing on morale:

> "…everybody's feeling pretty down now about the whole thing" (ALS5).

There were two occasions when P5 commented on differences between the School's focus and that of the wider College, in terms respectively of quality and accountability regimes and of the orientation towards young undergraduate students (rather than professionally-experienced postgraduates):

> "But at the same time everything else in the College is moving in the opposite direction… I'm not quite sure where what I want to do fits in with that view… there's a sort of tension in me anyway and it's now combining with an institutional and an idealistic tension as well" (ALS3);
> "The institution's just not aware of postgraduate students" (ALS4).

In the individual interview, P1 felt there was a constructive opportunity presented by action learning to resolve some of the conflict between individual School cultures and that of the institution as a whole, reinforcing the point reported by Evans in the context of Birkbeck College (Chapter 2):

> "The rest of the College is where we need to have more understanding…"

He then went on to propose a cross-College ALS:

> "The College would feel more like a, a coherent community if there were more ways in which people worked together…" (P1).

From the outset, P3, as academic leader, stated an aspiration to change the culture of the School, building on its key strength, the…

> "…very strong professional culture that we have that I like very much" (ALS2).

However, P3 identified in his presentation slot in ALS2 that he felt there was insufficient linkage in the organizational culture of the School to improving the student learning experience, because of immediate pressures and constraints relating to winning new contracts, delivering within budget and so on. He commented critically,

> "...we're too busy to focus on learning... that seems completely wrong" (ALS2).

P3's project, although pulled in various directions due to further pressures caused by the wider politics in the College, was focused throughout on developing a 'learning-centred' culture in the School.

In individual interviews, there was a sense in which interviewees perceived that the ALS had made an impact on life in the School. Those who had not been participants had all noticed the effect that the ALS had had on some participants, who had discussed it afterwards in positive terms, and in one case (P5), recommended it wholeheartedly to colleagues. Comments from those who had not taken part included:

> "It was one of the more pleasant and fruitful things happening";
>
> "There was a change of culture";
>
> "For me, it was a missed opportunity – it was something I was not involved in".

P2 reported the short-term impact of her colleagues noticing that the ALS participants emerged from their room at two o'clock on a Friday afternoon "chattering and on a high".

In terms of long-term impact, participants commented less on departmental culture than on the effect the ALS experience had had on themselves as individuals. P4 noted that claims for the transformational nature of action learning should be treated with caution:

> "Ah, part of the evangelism... I think that anything that says it's transformatory, transformative, has to be... looked it with a pinch of salt because, well, the sort of transformations the literature is talking about, er, are of a very high order... I think what the set activity does is contribute bit by bit by bit to transition - to transition from one state of working or being to another, and it's a very long process... transformation implies sudden, I dunno, some fundamental change, I haven't observed that. But what I have seen is small but significant little bits of change".

The ALS clearly had no impact on the culture of the College as a whole, since very few colleagues outside the School knew of its existence. The Principal was aware of it as the vehicle for a research project, but was presumably unaware of its impact on the life of the School. As there was longer-term interest within the School, in sustaining the ALS after the data-gathering had been completed (in the case of the original participants), and in joining the ALS in the case of those who had not originally taken part, it could be said that the set had made some impact on the culture of the School. There is an assumed connection here to the active championing of the ALS by the researcher, and it is conceivable that this had a greater impact because of the leadership position of the researcher. However, whether the concepts of leadership and line management are coterminous in this context is debatable.

The evidence does therefore support this proposition.

Proposition 8: Action learning can work across hierarchical levels in an organization, given appropriate circumstances of organizational culture.

The hierarchical mix was quite considerable, given that the range extended from the highest-paid to the second lowest-paid member of staff, and that it covered both administrative and academic staff, whose academic backgrounds varied considerably. The administrator was qualified to 'A' level standard,

the academics had Masters degrees, and P4 had a PhD and had successfully completed twelve doctoral supervisions. The length of service in the School varied from under 2 years (P5) to 17 years (P2).

This led to some uncertainties at the start of the ALS experience. P2 was self-conscious over "not being an academic" (ALS2), and also had concerns about dealing with assertive female colleagues in the United States (ALS3).

P4 stated in the interview that he had been initially doubtful as to the mix of participants:

> "I had a slight reservation, I thought, 'I wonder what it's gonna be like discussing professional issues, with someone who I don't know what they do and they don't know what I do really, so how can we engage in the sort of dialogue that action learning sets up?
>
> "My experience was very different from that and it soon became apparent that once you've suspended… your role, as it were, so that you're talking specifically about something that you're doing, it's no longer your role or your particular function within the organization, it's something you're doing, and it's something someone else is doing – there's an awful lot to talk about".

By ALS6, though, he commented favourably on the importance of P2 having been involved, saying that her contribution had been valuable in that had shown that her work was:

> "…completely parallel. A parallel universe, as it were" (ALS6).

In the same session, P6 commented on the democratic nature of the set and its working:

> "I think the structure means that [one person's] input means the same as the next person's input" (ALS6).

Although the researcher had been concerned as to the distorting effect of his involvement as line manager to the participants, this was put to each person in the individual interviews, and found not to be problematic:

> "I think that didn't matter at all - it was a good thing… You weren't involved as line manager [but for research purposes]…it was positive to have you there, because it was another ways of sharing with you erm, you know, things that we were doing, things that we were unsure about, things we needed help with, and I don't imagine anybody else felt there were things they didn't want to say because their line manager was present. ..Perhaps if we had a different line manager it might be different" (P1);
>
> "I thought that… it would constrain the set, because you're our line manager… and, er, obviously an authority in the department, but… it didn't feel like that. You became just that one of the group when you were there: you're very skilled at doing that. It didn't feel as though 'the boss' was there" (P6).

P4 commented that P3 had used his authority in order to set up the ALS in the first place, though arguably the authority of P4, as Head of Postgraduate Programmes, would have been equally credible, particularly if supported by other key colleagues.

There is a clear sense in the data which supports the Proposition that action learning does not need only to involve colleagues at peer level in order to be successful. Indeed, if the aspiration is to create a professional learning community in which distribution of leadership is important, it is surely crucial to ensure that organisms (such as action learning sets) are put in place which cross traditional hierarchical boundaries.

Chapter 5. Evaluation and Conclusion

A leading question in evaluating the research project would be to ask how effective it had been as an example of a Reflective Inquiry process (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). The question is applicable both to:

- the quality of the ALS experience itself;

and

- the project as a piece of action research.

The evaluation will respond at both of these levels. Criteria for evaluation are proposed by Coghlan and Pedler, who cite the need for evidence of "real problems being addressed… action being taken… learning" having occurred (2006: 136-7).

Successful Aspects of the Inquiry

Overall, from a constructivist perspective, the research has been successful as an inquiry process: it has generated changes in perspective, both for the researcher and the researched. It has provided a strong example of what Revans argued was a key strength of action learning, that of "finding the questions that need to be answered" (1980: 118) rather than the answers to previously-posed questions. The research questions which became important as the case study emerged had changed from those originally proposed.

Three key successes can be identified. Firstly, the methodology employed led to the generation of a rich set of data which in turn yielded analytical insights that contribute to theory on action learning. Secondly, writing up the findings using a case study approach produced unpredictable outcomes, due in part to its underlying philosophy of reflective inquiry. Thirdly, the benefits noted by the participants deriving from a stronger sense of team-working, and from the use of the structured format for the ALS, were contributing factors to strong educational and financial performance for INTED between 2005 and 2007.

However, there were several critical weaknesses which emerged during the research project which, had they been addressed earlier on, might have enabled greater success – both in terms of the action learning experience and of the action research project. These will be considered in turn, particularly since they may impact on the work of other professionals in the field.

Weaknesses in terms of Action Learning

One key issue was that, given the change in the power dimension of the project to one in which I was in potential conflict with my own line manager (rather than conflicting as line manager with the interests of the ALS participants), the ALS militated against my dealing with crucial aspects of my middle management role.

Using Floyd and Wooldridge's 'Self-Test of Middle Management Strategic Involvement', I found that my own work favoured time spent on facilitating and implementing (very much the focus of the research project itself, and of the internal departmental culture I had nurtured in my School), and that I was weaker in the areas of championing and synthesizing. These are the roles which most affect upward influence in the organization, and ones which should have been developed in order to enable me to lead with greater strategic effect in the College, and to influence what Mintzberg and Waters (1985) identify as emergent decision-making.

Floyd and Wooldridge acknowledge the constant and conflicting pressures on middle managers for simultaneously downsizing and sustaining competitive advantage. They note the tendency for middle managers to

> "...manipulate situations to make their units look good and to protect their turf.... when threatened, middle managers tended to 'drag their feet' and sometimes even to sabotage the company strategy" (1996: 22).

This was precisely the way in which my work risked being perceived as the School of INTED underwent a difficult and drawn-out review process, and its aftermath.

The championing role is the one in which the notion of being a change agent is most explicit, and where criteria for success include prudent risk-taking and astute political sensitivity. The authors distinguish legitimate championing from "other, more opportunistic forms of upward influence" (1996: 61) which they consider more prevalent. I was able to identify this role more strongly in the Regional Affairs context (where I was at the time of the project line-managing a colleague whose designation was that of Organisational Learning Champion) than that of INTED. As a result of reading, I had hoped to bring to the INTED ALS group (as my own challenge/problem to work on) a newly-identified need to be more of a champion in this context. In the event, this proved to be less of a priority than more immediate issues of departmental survival.

It is in the analysis of the synthesizing role that Floyd and Wooldridge dwell specifically on organizational learning (1996: 72-75). Here, there is a key notion of organization members being capable of responding pro-actively, rather than reactively, to stimuli in the external environment. I recognise my relative lack of energy in bringing the strategic aspirations of INTED to the attention of senior management, and my unwillingness to engage in potentially conflictual discourse at Management Team meetings – a flaw, since the authors highlight that research shows

> "…that higher-quality decisions result from a process that includes conflict" (1996: 80).

In this respect, the research fails to satisfy Coghlan and Pedler's criteria for evidence of organizational learning, in that they ask "what have the stakeholders of this research learned?" (2006: 137). In the context of the wider organization beyond INTED, learning was clearly limited.

Another problem for me is that, having adopted McGill's so-called 'alternative' or short-format approach to the conduct of the sets, I have been unable to test Weinstein's assertions on the importance of giving a full hour for each presenter's slot – in our format, the slots were 15 to 20 minutes long. Weinstein claims:

> "Most participants were surprised at how it usually took at least an hour to get to the bottom of an issue" (1995: 158).

Nevertheless, there were strong practical considerations, noted by P4 in the individual interviews – the balance between the theoretical benefits of spending full days on ALS sessions and the pragmatic issues of availability in a heavily – teaching oriented institution is naturally difficult to strike. On occasions where low numbers of participants allowed for longer presenters' slots than 15 or 20 minutes, there was no evidence of deeper questioning or challenging.

There is also the valid argument made earlier in the thesis about the daily engagement by the ALS members in my School in professional learning, which supports the notion that time could be used more effectively by a team which was already used to collaborative working, in contrast with set members in a more commercial organization which was less steeped in the sort of discourse involved in action learning.

Dehler and Edmonds's experience led them to conceive of the role of lecturer as coach (2006: 643) – a model for leadership by managers which was emerging in the School of INTED by the end of 2006 in the light of the ALS experience. Floyd and Wooldridge also cite the use of coaching as part of an organizational learning 'toolkit', although they do not mention action learning. In terms of skills development for managers, they state their conviction that internal mentoring relationships are "the most important – and probably the rarest" (1996: 142) actually to be found. With hindsight, it is conceivable that a more explicit focus on models of coaching as a practice permeating all aspects of working life in INTED might have influenced participant behaviour in the ALS and thus generated a higher quality of learning.

Marquardt and Waddill provide a reminder of the importance within reflective inquiry of double- and triple-loop learning:

> "Double-loop learning occurs when one questions one's own premises and triple-loop is questioning one's learning processes" (2004: 192-193).

In terms of action learning, the ALS experience was a good example of double-loop learning in that every participant's premises could be shown to have changed over the sequence of ALS sessions, in some cases in sophisticated and radical ways. There was not, on the basis of the short length of the experiment, and possibly because of the wider political climate within the institution, any evidence of triple-loop learning which might be the expectation (pace Rooke and Torbert, 2005) of strategic-level action. This never had the opportunity to materialize.

Greater success in sustaining the ALS over time, and realizing more of its potential for nurturing a professional learning community, might have been achieved if the set had spanned a longer continuous period, for instance of nine to twelve months, over two different academic years.

Weaknesses in terms of Action Research

As action research, the project demonstrated both double and triple-loop learning. The generation of new research questions which emerged from the data and the case study analysis is a clear example of questioning one's own premises, while the discussion which follows questions the learning processes involved in conducting the research.

One significant weakness was that the action research project around the use of ALS in INTED could have been a collective project, rather than an individual one, and to this extent was a lost opportunity. This would have enabled the collaborative development of triple-loop learning, both in the context of the

action research project and of the action learning process itself. However, although a collective action research project would have yielded some fascinating outcomes in terms of potential collaborative publications, it would have presented its own problems in being written up as a Doctoral thesis.

The fact that the ALS was confined to a single department prevented the project from investigating the potential for what Pedler et al outline as:

> "...wider networks of sets in organizations, and not as stand-alone entities. Linked to this is...individuals choosing 'own job' problems rather than working on negotiated organizational issues" (2005: 55).

Pedler et al do not report this as necessarily problematic, rather they note it as an example of dilution of Revans's classical principles. What happened in the INTED ALS may in fact have been typical of a wider trend in the application of action learning.

Nevertheless, in terms of action research, carrying out a project with wider scope than at departmental level would have enabled me to test out the potential for the positive impact of action learning across the institution as a whole, and thus to consider in more breadth the notion of strategic leadership in relation to what Pedler at al identify as the "negotiated organizational issues". The Principal always stated that he was supportive of such an idea, and espoused the value of the College becoming more of a learning organization.

Dehler and Edmonds discovered the importance of learning from action through writing (2006: 654-658), a missing element for the participants in the ALS (except for the researcher!). With hindsight, more use could have been made of writing by all the participants – for instance, of personal learning logs which could have been used for further triangulation of the data. However, this might arguably have caused interference with the authentic behaviour of participants during ALS sessions.

Finally, on reflection, it is conceivable that more penetrating questions could have been put in the semi-structured interviews with participants. With the hindsight of having written the case study, it is now clear that more emphasis could have been placed, for instance, on follow-up questioning about specific 'critical incidents' which had been identified in the transcripts.

Contribution of the Work to my own Practice

As a practitioner of action learning, I have developed new insights and understandings which have enabled me to refine my own practice and have led to framing questions for my own research in the future.

Having participated fully in the entire sequence of ALS sessions, I have gained the experience needed to facilitate other ALS groupings, and was able to apply this in the context of a second, cross-departmental set which met during Spring 2007. This was intended to provide ongoing support for seven project teams which had formed initially during an intra-institutional Change Academy event in January 2007. Following the two-day residential event, each team was invited to send a representative to the new ALS, and two set meetings took place, alongside other processes of support including internal consultancy and coaching.

My conviction that action learning worked well when it was used in a systematized way and was complemented by other interventions such as coaching led to my devising and launching, in early 2008, a regional leadership development project for professionals in the Children's Services sector. Under the auspices of the Training and Development Agency for Schools, I was able to establish a training programme for in-house facilitators and evaluators from a wide range of local authorities in South West England in which action learning played a key role.

Finally, from Spring 2008, there was further opportunity to apply the learning from the research project to my practice in using action research. I took on a

new job role whose responsibilities included facilitating ALS sessions for aspiring senior strategic leaders from different HEIs. As a result of my experience, I find that I am able not only to act with confidence as a set facilitator, but also as a convinced academic leader who understands the potential impact which action learning can make on leadership practices.

I am now committed to building further on my experience by identifying a personal post-doctoral research agenda. This will involve setting out, in different institutional contexts, to record and evaluate what happens when action learning sets work beyond and across academic departments, particularly when initiatives to enable them to work in such a way are actively supported by senior institutional leaders. In these cases, it will also be valuable to trace the impact such initiatives make on institutional cultures, and on the learning and teaching capabilities of the institutions concerned.

Originality and Implications for the Practice of Others

From my investigation of the literature, I have come to the conclusion that action learning has not previously been investigated through any published research as a tool for leadership development at faculty or departmental level in higher education.

Furthermore, I believe that the findings presented in the case study will be of use to those at more senior levels of leadership in higher education, particularly if they have experienced for themselves the benefits of action learning sets, if they wish to see strategic change implemented more effectively in their institutions.

At this stage, it is worth re-examining Revans's 'formula' for action learning, which states that learning (L) arises through the synthesis between programmed knowledge (P), questioning (Q) and reflection (R). This is presented as:

$L = P + Q + R$

The ALS experience generated a great deal of rich data which can be categorized variously against the elements of the formula. Such examination may be particularly interesting when juxtaposed with the skills needed for effective set membership which are identified by O'Hara et al (2004).

The seven factors which they identify (2004: 36) are matched as follows to Revans's categories of P, Q and R:

P:	Understanding of group process
	Understanding of learning process
	Feedback capability (as a form of 'technical' knowledge/skill)
	Active listening skills (" " " " ")
	Creative problem solving skills (" " " ")
Q:	Questioning skills
R:	Reflective skills

In reflecting on the data, it would arguably be inadvisable to be tempted to ask about the relative significance of the learning (L) produced if the other factors are evident in greater or smaller proportions. However, it is worthwhile defining P, Q and R in the context of the School of International Education.

In respect of programmed knowledge (P), it is clear that the ALS participants had significant knowledge in three distinct areas:

- Professional knowledge and experience of both group and learning processes
- Discipline knowledge of our own field (broadly defined as language teacher education)
- Technical knowledge and skills (including those identified above)

The first two areas are closely aligned in the case of the School of INTED, but it would be interesting to contrast such knowledge with that held, for instance,

by a set comprising engineers without any knowledge or skills relating to group processes. According to the findings of O'Hara et al (2004), such a group would have been less capable of being a self-managed action learning set, and would have depended to a greater extent on an expert facilitator from outside the group. Nevertheless, as noted previously, the ALS in the School of INTED was in a strong position from the outset to self-manage its activities.

Questioning (Q) skills were evident, and were also discussed subsequently by participants as being an area which they felt they could have developed more strongly. The extent of challenge involved in questioning may well impact on the quality of learning (L).

In terms of reflection (R), the transcripts showed both:

a) evidence of real-time reflection during each session, and its impact on suggested actions;
b) evidence of collaborative reflection on the process (at the end of each session), with the intention of improving the process.

In addition, there was also continuous concern over participants' feelings of finding difficulty in being reflective (or failing to transfer one of the successful aspects of the ALS experience) in the wider context of their daily practice. This may go beyond the scope of Revans's original conception of reflection, but seems particularly relevant to action learning when set in a context of professional education.

The categories of P, Q and R map on successfully to the categories of discourse intervention which emerged in the initial analysis of the transcripts of ALS 2 and ALS3, as shown in the figure below:

Original category of discourse intervention	Category from Revans's formula (1982) into which it fits	Category from O'Hara et al (2004) into which it fits
Confessional	R	Reflective skills
Empathetic	P	Feedback capability
Supporting	P	Feedback capability
Challenging	Q	Questioning skills
Clarifying	Q	Questioning skills

Fig. 4.4 Discourse interventions mapped onto categories identified by Revans (1982) and O'Hara (2004)

Although it would have been possible to analyse all the ALS transcripts in terms of discourse interventions, it was not felt that this would have added qualitatively to the case study.

The Revans formula does not take into account two factors which were highly significant for the ALS under investigation: Affective factors (which might be known as A) and the influence of political Conflict (which might be known as C) with the wider organizational values and practice where action learning is situated.

In the context of this case study one might postulate a variation to the formula:
$L = P + Q + R + (A - C)$;
in which the net effect of tension between A and C determines whether or not this enhances or detracts from the learning resulting from P + Q + R.

For those seeking to carry out similar empirical studies on action learning, some 'fuzzy generalizations' might at this stage be of some help.

It appears from this empirical study that action learning may function successfully as a strategic leadership tool at departmental level in higher education, and as such may help to nurture the sense of a professional learning community which impacts on the student learning experience. The chances of achieving success in this sense may be increased when:

- There is a sustained focus on action learning, and on other forms of nurturing professional learning such as coaching, over a period spanning at least two separate academic years in the life of an institution
- Action learning has the full backing of senior institutional leaders, with the recognition that critical understanding of organizational politics will need to be acknowledged
- Action learning is integrated into the strategic activity of key departmental leaders who recognize the scope it offers for developing distributed leadership
- Professional behaviour by participants, within and beyond the confines of the action learning set, is authentic

In the case study conducted in the School of INTED, there appears to have been considerable application of what Revans identified as 'programmed knowledge' (P). This is presumably due to the constant focus of the staff team in their daily practices on professional education, and seems to have made for successful operating processes of the ALS. There was relatively little time required to adjust to the norms of working as a set, and the ALS became almost immediately self-managing. It might therefore be assumed that in other disciplines in higher education where professional education is important (for example, in business schools, faculties of law, social work departments, schools of medicine and faculties for health-related professions), the chances of earlier success in establishing action learning might be greater than in disciplines where more abstract conceptual or technical knowledge is dominant.

In such disciplines, more attention would need to be given to the use of external facilitators, possibly from the staff development units of the institutions where departments wish to establish action learning.

The emphasis here on the will voluntarily to establish action learning is crucial, as there is no evidence in this research to disprove the 'classical principle' that action learning should not be a 'compulsorily-conscripted' actively.

In terms of the potential for further research, several questions remain outstanding from the issues raised by Munro (2005: 47). It would be valuable to examine further the linkage between the professional learning capacity which appears to be nurtured by action learning in educational institutions and the potential for enhancing the student learning experience. It would also serve the educational community well to identify in more detail what are the "factors and learning variables that influence a professional learning capacity" (ibid.) and "indicators of the growth of a professional learning capacity" (ibid.).

At a generic level (i.e. beyond the education sector), there is still a case to be made for more research which focuses on the transferability of the capabilities developed through action learning at the level of particular sets to organizational learning as a whole, as indicated by a collective capacity for leadership and management development.

An agenda can also be identified for further research into action learning for educational leadership and management in universities, as pointed out by Bourner and Lawson (2000: 8).

There is arguably a need for further empirical studies in action learning involving academic staff from disciplines not related to professional education, in which there is less of an innate sensibility to group processes, learning processes and feedback skills.

Finally, it would be fascinating to know what happens if and when action learning is used within senior management teams in higher education, and what impact this makes on the notion of developing organizational learning for an institution as a whole.

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Appendix 1 Chronology of institutional events in relation to ALS sessions

Date	College Events	School of International Education Events	Action Learning Set sessions
July 2003	Appointment of new Principal		
September 2003		Creation of School of International Education (formerly Department of International Education)	
March 2004		Preparation of School Business Plan 2004-2007	
May 2004			ALS1
September 2004	Start of 'root and branch' Portfolio Review of INTED activity		
May 2005	Submission of application for Taught Degree-Awarding Powers		
December 2005	Presentation of Portfolio Review paper to Academic Board	Lobbying of Academic Board by INTED staff members	
January 2006		Agreement of new financial parameters for School of INTED, with expectation of 35% overhead contribution from gross tuition fees	
February 2006			ALS2
March 2006			ALS3
			ALS4
April 2006		Call for 33% academic staff reduction in 1 year, 50% in 2 years	
May 2006		Planning for School	ALS5

	Awayday event; P5 becomes first INTED staff member to accept voluntary severance	
June 2006	Awayday event: simulation of INTED as independent company in the future	ALS6
September 2006	Two further INTED staff announce their acceptance of voluntary severance packages, including the Assistant Dean and P6	
December 2006	Second Awayday event enables staff team to reaffirm values and beliefs	

Appendix 2 Overview of Participants' Projects and Initial Questions Posed over the sequence of ALS sessions

X = not present for the session
F = Facilitator for the session

Participant	*Project Topic*	*Question (s) for ALS1,7.5.04*	*Comments*	*Question (s) for ALS2, 3.2.06*	*Comments*	*Question (s) for ALS3, 3.3.06*	*Comments*	*Question (s) for ALS4, 24.3.06*	*Comments*	*Question (s) for ALS5, 5.5.06*	*Comments*	*Question (s) for ALS6, 2.6.06*	*Comments*
P1	Developing greater autonomy in learners	To what extent are you an autonomous learner?	Related to key appraisal target following 2003 inspection visit by British Council	X		How can I set up student experiences outside the classroom which will generate spoken and written language?; How can I build on the course I took on online learning last year?	Related to current course responsibilities and appraisal target set on e-learning	F	P1 perceived himself from this point on as not having a project of his own, hence his volunteering to facilitate at ALS4 and ALS5	F		X	
P2	Client service improvement/ Building relations with US partners	How can I follow up on a benchmarking visit to a local hotel?	At this stage, P2 was focused only on client service issues	How can I gain greater self-confidence in preparing for first solo visit overseas?	P2 had taken on a new role, and had taken part in appraisal one month before ALS2	How can I overcome my worries about my imminent visit (the next day)?	Only attended part of the session, as P2 needed to prepare for the visit	X		How can I get any feedback from people who are not responding to my follow-up messages?	Disappointment sinking in after the initial success of P2's first overseas visit	X	
P3	Developing a learning-centred	How to engage colleagues in	General sense of School as	How can the process continue in a	Morale affected by impact of	How can I change my leadership	Seeking a greater sense of challenge	What does involving students	Testing how far colleagues	How can the planned awayday be	Immediate response sought to a	How can I launch the planned	Again, practical solutions

	culture in the School	the process?	autonomous in decision-making	way which will recover morale?	Portfolio Review	behaviours in order to nurture a greater sense of innovation in our work?	from colleagues in the Set	mean in terms of management structures in the School?	might go in implementing radical change in power balance in the School	a success, given the current crisis in the School?	recent crisis	simulation without wasting too much time on background briefing details?	required in response to immediate events
P4	Embedding reflection as a tool for postgraduate learning in a teacher training context	What is your personal experience of the value of review and/or reflection?	A topic of academic expertise for P4; is he gathering research data of his own?	F	Much intervention and suggestion offered in addition to strong facilitation	X		X		How can we find ways of writing up our work as a professional team?	Long-term subject of interest; relates to P4's appraisal targets concerning his status as Reader	How can I move towards establishing a library of photographs for student analysis?	Changed during the course of the discussion to an online audio-visual collection.
P5	i) Consultancy in Djibouti ii) Developing new module	X		i) How to reconcile feeling of being in an 'ivory tower' institution with the day-to-day needs of beneficiaries in developing world context?	Sense of gaining a great deal from a formative discussion which challenged P5's paradigms	F	Very strong in role of facilitator; reported back on some difficulties in implementing actions	X		ii) How important is it for teachers to feel they work in a professional community; what factors help us to work in one in the School?	Relates to new module which P5 was planning to lead the following term	X	
P6	Developing new module	X		(Reproaches herself for not having articulated a question)	Other participants helped to develop a constructive debate; P6 expresses gratitude at end of session	How to promote greater creativity in students, while remaining accountable to QA procedures?	Notes changes in her own practice, and expresses some surprise at how ALS has helped her make changes	How can I find a way to ensure that I do record my reflections; how do others manage this?	Triggers discussion by two other participants on their own difficulties in recording reflection	X		F	

Appendix 3 Overview of Participants' Projects and Actions Agreed over the sequence of ALS sessions

X = not present for the session

F = Facilitator for the session

Participant	*Project Topic*	*Actions agreed in ALS1*	*Comments*	*Actions agreed in ALS2*	*Comments*	*Actions agreed in ALS3*	*Comments*	*Actions agreed in ALS4*	*Comments*	*Actions agreed in ALS5*	*Comments*	*Actions agreed in ALS6*	*Comments*
P1	Developing greater autonomy in learners	Interview students about their experience in the School in order to identify desire for more autonomy	Action fulfilled and changes made to course as a result	X		Discuss ideas which emerged with other colleagues in teaching team		F Create online self-access language learning portal for students		F		X	
P2	Building relations with US partners	Shadow an international student visitor to the College in order to determine how to improve first impressions	Action not completed Job role changed by ALS2	Develop a presentation to take on USA visit; plan for intended goals for each separate institution to be visited	All successfully implemented	Decide on plan for follow-up actions on return from USA visit.	This would probably have been an inevitable outcome of the visit in any case; not a good example of an AL action	X		Contact 1 institution in USA using tactics agreed; arrange to meet new institutional webmaster.	Successfully achieved	X	
P3	Developing a learning-centred culture in the School	Set up a creative space in the School, commissioning an Art & Design student to devise initial ideas	Board and pens provided in School office area, but not used creatively; 'Learning	Conduct baseline survey to assess School culture; commitment to finding ways of	Survey designed but not implemented until February 2007; online research carried out	Plan for School awayday event, incorporating idea of students as co-workers rather than	Discussion took place successfully at Staff meeting, and met with favourable response	Write up his reflections on the set before the end of the day; Discuss with another School how to launch a	Both actions achieved successfully; 6 INTED students became involved in	Generate ideas for a simulation based on life in the School as a private company in the future;	Excellent example of a formative discussion which generated creative and practical ideas for	Disseminate the work of the ALS more widely in the institution.	Achieved in February 2007 with launch of College-wide ALS

			Slot' in use in Staff meetings to share new ideas	developing student leadership in the School	on student leadership	customers, and bring to next Staff meeting.		student-led project in Primary Education	Primary Education e-learning project	propose this at next Staff Meeting.	action		
P4	Embedding reflection as a tool for postgraduate learning in a teacher training context	Discuss with postgraduate tutor team to review use of reflective portfolio on M.Ed course	Action completed 4 months later	F		X		X		Produce pilot audio-visual material and use with postgraduate group.	Work with the student group was subsequently postponed, and appeared again as part of proposed actions in ALS6.	Run a session with postgraduate students; plan for international symposium in 2007; investigate funding sources.	First action not achieved; other actions successfully completed
P5	i) Consultancy in Djibouti ii) Developing new module	X		i) Read about coaching and mentoring; plan an approach to project evaluation	Some success, although project changed due to practical difficulties with overseas personnel	F		X		ii) Research the recorded experience of graduates from the previous programme; read evaluation report; read the literature on managing teachers' expectations.	Actions not achieved due to negotiation within 3 weeks of ALS5 of a voluntary severance agreement with effect from the Summer vacation	X	
P6	Developing new module	X		Clarify desired final outcomes and outputs from the module	Achieved successfully	Systematic ally record reflections; think about sharing 'insider knowledge' with students; get interim	Difficulty noted in recording reflections; other actions achieved.	Get more student feedback by setting up an informal focus group; analyse Module Evaluation Forms and	First action not achieved; other actions implemente d successfull y.	X		F	

						feedback on student perceptions of the module.		record her responses; keep log on preparing for her next taught module.						

Appendix 4 Extract from Researcher's Diary, 24th March 2006

A very insightful, if rambling, session at times. I found it slightly less structured than previous sessions, due to small group size and rather 'permissive' facilitator. Worried if we're doing too much suggesting, not challenging enough.

Great support from colleagues left me with a clear feeling of the worth of the culture change towards learning-centredness. Was very pleased that my action had obliged me to spend time investigating new field of student leadership on NCSL website.

Very productive discussion on including a student rep on School Management Team – more pitfalls than benefits, but having regular focus groups chimed very well with seminar in London yesterday on international student marketing.

This feels like a very enjoyable way of working with colleagues and sharing a sense of common direction!

(P6) readily admits to own perceived weaknesses – would a man have done the same? (P1) and I both affirmative in our overt support of her and all the brilliant work she does. This is an opportunity too rarely afforded by normal working life.

Appendix 5 Brief Survey of practices and beliefs in the School of International Education, conducted in February 2007

(Composite responses shown: 11 returns received, from a total of 12 invited; adapted from a survey instrument by NCSL[2004])

PLEASE TICK ONE BOX FOR EACH STATEMENT IN BOTH COLUMN A and COLUMN B

COLUMN A - In your view, is the statement:

True of no staff	True of few staff	True of some staff	True of most staff	Don't know		**COLUMN B – How important is the statement?** Not at all important	Of limited importance	Important	Crucial	Bad practice
			11		1. Staff in this School see themselves as learners			1	10	
		3	8		2. Staff use insights from their professional learning to feed into School policy development			5	6	
		2	9		3. Staff reflect on their practice as a way of identifying professional learning needs			4	7	
		2	6	3	4. Staff experiment with their practice as a conscious strategy for improving learning and teaching			4	7	
		3	6	2	5. Staff modify their practice in the light of feedback from students			3	8	
1	2	2	4	2	6. Staff regularly collaborate to plan their teaching		3	6	2	
	5	4	1	1	7. Staff challenge one another and are not afraid of disagreement		3	7	1	
	1	4	5	1	8. There is a shared vision among staff as to where the School is going			3	8	
		2	9		9. There are processes for involving all staff in decision-making			4	7	
		1	9		10. Staff are encouraged to take on leadership roles			7	4	
	1	1	7	1	11. Opportunities are provided for staff to evaluate School policy critically			6	5	
	2	6	3		12. Staff development time is used effectively in the School			6	5	
		6	5		13. Staff come up with ideas that are then implemented in the School			8	3	
	2	2	5		14. There are processes for involving students in decision-making			8	3	

Appendix 6 Prompt questions for semi-structured individual interviews with ALS participants, Winter 2006/7

Action Learning Set: individual interview

Areas for discussion:

- Looking back, how do view your experience of the ALS?
- In what ways did the Set help you with your learning?
- What do you think the successful aspects (if any) of the Set have been?
- What have you become better at since joining the Set?

- How well did we work together as a Set?
- Is there anything we did not do particularly well?
- Do you perceive any of your colleagues differently now you know them from the ALS?

- What, if any, were the transformative effects of the ALS:
  - for you as an individual?
  - for the Set (did our behaviour change over time)?
  - for the School?

- Did any factors weaken the potential impact of the Set?

- How did PG's position as line manager affect behaviours in the Set?

Appendix 7 Unedited transcript of semi-structured interview with P4

Semi-Structured Interview with P4, 6th March 2007

P3: Do you think the workings of our set compared to your original expectations?

P4: Erm, we didn't follow what I would call the classical model. You know, most of the, sort of, the key texts – they map out a rather different procedure. A much more, if you like, committed procedure on the part of an organization to doing it, and reading, this is what people imply that, er, the activity's going to be at the centre of the institution. I think what we did was quite different, but that didn't detract from its value – and it's always the difference between what you find in the books, which is always easy on paper – perfectly possible and plausible. But if you actually tried out what they're proposing, you'd probably be engaged for about 10 or 15 hours per week preparing, meeting, debriefing, preparing for the next one! If a company says 'OK, this is how to go about it' – fine. But for an educational institution, with so many different activities. It was, erm, if you like, not like it was in the book.

P3: Does that mean it was a kind of 'lite' model?

P4: No, no, I don't - far from it. I mean it was…I think the intensity of meeting is not the issue. I don't think that's the point. I think it's all about what you get out of a meeting. And what the meetings – let's call them meetings – what the meetings then spin off outwards, erm, you have to have a meeting twice a week to be effective. No, it wasn't light at all, it was a meeting adapted to local purposes, and it says something about the strength of it- that it is flexible, and that its principles can be adhered to.

P3: We'll come back later to some of the institutional issues, for change and so on. But can I focus on you and your personal experience - what was your personal experience of the ALS and how does it compare to some of the other ways people can meet in the institution?

P4: Compared with other… my experience. Erm, we've talked for many years about trying to get people together to work on different things for the department. We tried the [indistinguishable word] and it sort of disappeared, erm - it was almost like at the time saying, 'I wonder if we'll ever be able to do anything like this in the department', so when the action learning set came along it seemed like another opportunity to get everyone together, to get people together to talk about their professional work.

P3: We'd tried various collaborative processes.

P4: Yeah, well we tried one. Which had failed probably… I mean, the excuse was 'We're never able to meet, you know, because we're never here, we're never all here.' But I don't think that was the real reason for it, er, bombing. I

think it was because people didn't, really didn't see the point of it. You know, 'What am I gonna gain from this?' Particularly in a place where time is so pushed as ours that people are going to give up their time for something they don't necessarily see any value in.

So when the action learning set came along it seemed like a really golden opportunity to engage in this sort of work which I personally believe is a really valuable way of moving things forward in lots of ways.

So, I was very happy when it started. I was slightly dubious, to tell you the truth, about whether it would work with a mixed group. That was my on... I had a slight reservation, I thought, 'I wonder what it's gonna be like discussing professional issues, with someone who I don't know what they do and they don't know what I do really, so how can we engage in the sort of dialogue that action learning sets up?

My experience was very different from that and it soon became apparent that once you've suspended - and this one of the values of the format that you suspend a lot of things once you've suspended your role, as it were, so that you're talking specifically about something that you're doing, it's no longer your role or your particular function within the organization, it's something you're doing, and it's something someone else is doing – there's an awful lot to talk about.

And you are able to actually contribute to someone else's thinking or planning or progress. And that I found very very, er, valuable, and something of a revelation. Erm, so that, even when facilitating it was still a very interesting process to take part in, just listening to what people were saying, and listening to all the interaction between people and seeing 'Yes, this is - you know, this is possible'. It is possible to build a semi-formal, I'll call it, semi-formal network among a group of people, where they can actually find common ground, not so much common ground, but common concern. In other words, it doesn't matter about the topic of what you're doing – it's the doing of it which is the issue.

So I found that very, very interesting and sort of engaging with people professionally in a way that, that otherwise would have been impossible. So my experience was er, was a good experience, erm, I often felt that perhaps I didn't contribute very much or I (laughs), I changed my contribution every time I came along, but that's probably because my contribution changes every time I come along. But that's more, more about me than about the set. But I found it a very, a very uplifting experience in the sense that you know something is possible. Whether it's sustainable or not is another matter, because I think people went along with it initially as a sort of a cooperative thing for you, to say 'Yeah, we'll, sure we'll help you out and we'll form a set' and maybe I think there was something in that behind my motivation for joining this thing: 'Paul's doing his research, I'll contribute to this and help him out'. But it actually became more than the research. It actually became reflexive in the genuine sense, so that the research actually started becoming a learning process; so that we were, we ourselves were learning within a research process. And that the

real story is about the learning that one does within the research process. It's not about action learning sets or anything, it's about professional learning. So it actually became genuinely reflexive in that way, which for me was very interesting because it's er, it's something I'm interested in on a professional level anyway, working with doctoral students, the thing that, the real learning that goes on is not so much the creation of wonderful new ideas about whatever they're researching, but it's what they learn personally from the process about themselves, or more interestingly what their informants learn about themselves or learn about anything, from taking part in this higher-level process, which involves, as I say, standing outside and looking at what you're doing from a bit of a distance, and having other people looking at it from a distance. And I think it contributed to everybody's learning in the group, in small but significant ways.

P3: Can you say what you learned personally?

P4: Yeah, erm, I learnt on two levels. Erm, I hope it improved me, I hope I learnt - should I say better, to listen better because the format forces you to listen, and the coercion of the format in this sense is a good is a good discipline to step into, so I hope I learnt more about listening to people. Erm, I learnt in a much more functional sense about some of the things that people are doing, some of the things that were going on. I learnt about other people's struggles to do things, push things forward. Erm, I learnt about action learning in a much deeper sense than I had before from my engagement with the literature and some desultory attempts to do it with colleagues. So, erm, from a personal point of view as a participant, I learnt a great deal. Erm, I don't think I learnt very much about what I was actually doing. It was all process learning. Erm, I learnt about how can you sit together with a group of people and work to an agreed set of rules. And actually make progress in your own thinking/planning.

P3: You mentioned earlier on that you were – obviously as an expert on professional learning, it's difficult to separate out what's going on for you personally from your position of expertise, and so I guess that there's a notion of constantly switching between different layers of how you perceive

P4: Yeah, but I found actually that when I was engaged, just taking part, I don't think it contaminated my experience, if you like, erm, I was in it because I was in it, so I wasn't trying to second guess it. I don't think you can, because if you're fully engaged, you're engaged with the here and now.

P3: I found the same, yeah.

P4: And one of the things is you might decide later, 'Oh yeah – professional learning!' But while you're thinking about professional learning, you stop listening to what's going on around you – or stop contributing, or stop facilitating. Because the rules are very, the rules are very powerful. And, er, I think they're absolutely necessary. I don't think it works without, I mean – you take some of those rules away and you adapted the rules from the sort of, the main event stuff – it wouldn't have worked. Erm, I think the idea of having

everybody contributing, rather than just focus on one person's things, made all the difference. That, that variation does the job.

P3: Can I go back to what you were saying about the importance of suspending people's roles for the set. Could you say something about how quickly we got to that point? Is that something we learned to do over time, or did we very quickly get it?

P4: I think we got very quickly into it. I was quite surprised. For example, we'd have, erm, someone like [P2] in the set who very quickly became [P2] in the set and not [P2] doing particular jobs in the administrative area. Erm, I can't explain it any more articulately than that, that, erm, the set enabled her to be herself. That's the only way I can express it, rather than '[P2] who does…' The relative clause was taken away, because you're given that opportunity, that space to present yourself. So you become that person, and maybe that person is - I don't know, I haven't thought about this – but maybe when you're in the set, you have a persona which is that person in the set. But I don't necessarily think you do. I think it enables you, it frees you from the constraints of your actual work role, 'cause you're not actually doing your job at the time. That's suspended – that's outside the room.

P3: Does that perception extend to the role I played, or perhaps I suspended?

P4: Oh, yeah, definitely yeah. We were all equal. This is the remarkable thing about the set, is that all status is suspended, you're just 4 or 5 people who are trying to do – you're trying to do something.

P3: The literature talks a lot about the importance of it being peers that are doing this. So there's lots of examples of senior managers of an equivalent level from different organizations meeting together – erm, very little evidence of success or even people trying it where there are different hierarchical levels implicit, if you like and obviously our group was very mixed in that sense. Did my line management role get in the way?

P4: No, not at all. No. I think the only way in which your line management role contributed was in setting up the set. In other words, once it was set up – in other words, you were quite legitimately using some of the authority that goes with the line management , saying 'I think we ought to do this', and being able to say that a lot more forcefully and insistently than someone who's not got the line management responsibility, which maybe was why the Collaborative Learning Forum bombed, because you know there were, there wasn't that slight edge of authority there saying 'this is something we – not *ought* to be doing, this is something we *should* be doing.' But once you're in it, I don't think status comes into it any more. But maybe that's the way you're handling your own role.

P3: Can I pursue that in terms of my role as researcher, rather than line manager? How interfering was that?

P4: Didn't – I don't think it interfered at all. You know, we know you're doing the research, but again, the engagement in the event: you forget all of that, very quickly. It's like you forget the tape recorder's there, you forget… you know – you're in it! Because you're engaged in something that you're doing, and others are engaged in what they're doing, you're collectively engaged in supporting each other and teasing things out and nudging people, whatever. So you forget you're in a research event, you know – it goes. In fact, after the first or second meeting, I can't even remember there being a tape recorder there. It's, you know, it becomes that routinised, if you like, without being ritualised.

P3: So you've mentioned some of the aspects of personal learning that worked for you.

P4: Yeah.

P3: How transferable are those factors to other forums in which you work? For example, if you have become better at listening, or at least you were in that situation better at listening because of the format, has that in some way transferred into your professional life more widely, or any other aspect?

P4: Yeah, erm, difficult to say, I mean, I don't think I'm actually aware of it. You know, whether it, it's only speaking now that I'm sort of more conscious of it.

(Long pause)

Erm, I'm sort of labouring it a bit. I'm just thinking that it enables you – one of the things that it does enable you to do – because it's right there in front of you – is to, to try and step into somebody else's shoes – see what they're doing. See the sort of challenges they face. It makes you more tolerant. I think we're, I mean I don't know how you find evidence for that.

P3: Do you think for example that you behave differently in interacting with people as a result of the set? The example with [P2] that you were talking about?

P4: Yeah I think certainly working with [P2] definitely – definitely changed the nature of my interaction. Yeah, definitely. Erm, with my, you know with my sort of, tutor colleagues, I don't think you – I think there's a subtle shift of change, I mean there are some, there are always some people who you interact with more on a professional level than others. With whom you feel at ease discussing professional dilemmas, or what have you. And you always self-select those people. Erm, and I don't think that changed them. So that you know, erm, [P5], who I would have a professional discussion with anyway. Erm, I can't imagine having very much of a professional discussion with [P1] even after the experience of the set apart from what we needed to do in a particular – a particular job. I don't think it changed that sort of dyna - It enriched what was already possible, but as I say what it does do, is it gives you an insight into the what other people are doing and from that point of view it's

very valuable. From your own professional relationship with them, you know that they're doing things. Personal chemistry's another, another matter. And again, that's one of the things the set does – it suspends that. Because you're almost in a roleplay situation, a semi-roleplay. You can suspend a lot of that personal stuff. I must say it's a pity some people didn't take part (laughs). I think some people would've found it most interesting to be in the situation and then to see the effect . I find it significant that certain people chose to go and certain people chose not to go, but I dunno if that's something you want to explore.

P3: Well, it's certainly something I'd like to continue looking at and seeing if we can sustain the set, or maybe start a second one.

P4: Yeah – oh, I think we can. I think we should. I mean, it's a pity it didn't get going again last week. I suppose we won't be able to do it now till - 2010 or something.

P3: Yeah – there might be all sorts of ways it could help our transition towards a new School or

P4: Indeed!

P3: Erm, can I - again, you'll have a unique perspective on this because you've read the literature on this, and you know what claims are made for action learning sets. With this version of it, I'm interested to see how that compares against those claims. What kind of processes do you think worked well for us as a set? What were the things that we learned to do particularly well?

P4: Erm, I thought we learnt how to focus on something individually very quickly. You know the idea of 'You've got a five-minute slot to say what you're doing'. I think we learnt very quickly how to make the most of that five minutes. Erm, we got pretty good at facilitating. You know, those of us who facilitated, I think we got pretty good at that. And er, I think the other thing we got pretty good at as time went on – I don't think we were too good at it at the beginning – but I think, I think we got much better at sort of probing what other people were doing, we learnt the questions to ask. We learnt the buttons to push. Erm, it didn't happen instantly, it was an evolving thing. There was a certain sort of erm, sense one gets from the literature that this all starts happening pretty quickly, you know, it's unproblematic, because it's always presented to you in its, you know, in its theoretical form, erm, it would be nice to see some case studies – see what actually happened. Erm, but I think we got pretty good, I mean I can put my finger on those three things straight away. We could fall into, after two or three meetings we fell into it very quickly. The first couple of meetings it's all a bit awkward, you know 'What am I supposed to do now?' But after 2 or 3 meetings we were quite well-grooved. Perhaps too well-grooved, perhaps we n - but I dunno, I think we benefited from that.

P3: Why were we apparently so - why did we find it so easy? It can be very difficult according to the literature. Some people give up after only trying it for one session.

P4: Yeah, well I think we were ready. I think we probably – without knowing it – instinctively found something useful there - it was 'Hey this is all right, this is handy, this.' It's worth making, finding an hour to do this, 'cause it gives you a bit of perspective – its functional aspects of moving a project forward, I dunno (laughs) – because I never had a project, really. I've got twenty projects, so which one do I bring, you know? But it's this stepping out of the daily madness into a sort of peace – area of calm water.

P3: In actual fact, I mean, your idea of a five-minute slot is a little but underplayed, because we did actually go for fifteen-minute slots.

P4: Was it?

P3: And we did have, yeah we had two hours on most occasions by the time we'd done reflective slots and so on. Yeah, it was 12 till 2 that we carved out and we pretty much used up all the time.

P4: I had memories of one-hour meetings. Goodness me! So we actually went on even longer?

P3: Two to two and a half hours.

P4: And yet we never actually felt tired! I never did. I never felt tired at the end of it, in fact, I felt, sort of, strangely energised by it. Erm, which may be another of its sort of benefits that's come out.

P3: It was nearly always at the end of a Friday, after all.

P4: Yeah

P3: What did we not do so well, as a set?

P4: I don't know, erm, it's difficult to say, because you don't know.

P3: Do you think there's anything we could have done better?

P4: We could have met more often, but that's not really talking about what we did. Erm, yeah, it's all about I don't think the word 'better' is very helpful here. I think you learn to become better, at using the situation and deriving benefit from, and helping others to derive benefit from it. So you gradually learn the sort of interventions which move things forward. You learn the interventions which hold things back. And so obviously the longer you're gonna work together and the more aware you become of these things, the better you're gonna become at it. So you know the actual experience itself was great as it went along, and it gradually accumulated force. So that by the time we'd

finished, and you could sort of say, 'OK, that's the last one', I think we were getting a lot more out of it in terms of the sort of collective activity, specific types of talk, particular ways of talking about things, and the, and the familiarity as well – you get more familiar with the way people operate. So I think it's all about... you know, I think you improve if that's the right word, at interacting, you become better at using the situation.

P3: What would you say about any claims, again made in the literature that action learning can have a transformative effect. What does that mean in this context?

P4: Ah, part of the evangelism. I'm, I think that anything that says it's transformatory, transformative, has to be sort of, has to be looked it with a pinch of salt because,well, the sort of transformations the literature is talking about, er, are of a very high order. And I think you're, the sort, I think what the set activity does is contribute bit by bit by bit to transition - to transition from one state of working or being to another, and it's a very long process, that you – transformation to me hints at, erm, 'Road to Damascus'. You know, 'I went to bed as a tax inspector and I woke up as a Saint.' And I don't think action learning can bring about that sort of transformation. I think if you took a long perspective on an organization and knew that they'd been working in this way for ten years and that the organization had changed quite fundamentally, you might say, 'Well, it's had a transformative effect' on that organization because they are now completely different from what they were 10 years ago, there's been a flip-flop. You've moved out of one stage into another stage, and I think that that sort of claim is overblown. But I do think it can contribute to a gradual process of transition, because I don't think you can – transformation implies sudden, I dunno, some fundamental change, I haven't observed that. But what I have seen is small but significant little bits of change.

P3: To what extent did the set contribute to that?

P4: I think the set made quite a, a big contribution to that, for those of us who were involved in it. I would be interested to know what people who *weren't* in it thought

about what was going on within it. Whether they thought it was a cosy little club, or 'These guys are just wasting their time' or whatever, I don't know. Erm, but I think certain people within the senior management of this College would benefit from a long period of engagement in this sort of activity.

P3: Well, there is a belief, because of the Top Management Programme - which two members of the senior management team have participated in,

P4: Indeed they have!

P3: - that action learning is a very good thing,

P4: Yeah - and where's the evidence?

P3: - within a programme which is a programmed intervention which is outside the institution. Attempts to bring it into the institution have not been successful.

P4: Because they haven't been committed to it, then.

P3: They perhaps haven't understood all the possibilities of it within an institution.

P4: Exactly! If they knew, they probably wouldn't want it, because it does shift your perspective on things very slightly, but not necessarily in the direction that they want it shifted.

P3: Well, can I relate this point to the issue of what was happening in the background of the life of the School while the action learning set was meeting? Because it was a very stormy period of institutional transition.

P4: Permanently stormy!

P3: So - yeah, I mean you've got the longer... the bigger picture, as it were, so you might not see that as a specific twelve-month period.

P4: A succession of depressions, battering our shores!

P3: Do you see that as having happened over the last twenty years?

P3: I think [the College] as an institution has been in crisis for years. It was in crisis when I arrived and it's in crisis now.

P4: There's nothing particular about this set of circumstances?

P4: Well, the major structural changes have been much more recent, I mean the

P3: The building crumbling?

P4: Yeah, as we sit here and disappear into [the office below]. But the background to what was going on – when was this: 2004, 2005, into 2006, yes, this was a period of major structural

P3: So how did that relate to the workings of the set? How did it impact on it?

P4: I don't think it – I think the things the set did was to keep that stuff out. It was almost like a way of – you could say 'All right, well here's a way of escaping for an hour or two from this madness' in the same way that, er, if you've got a regular teaching commitment, going to class and working with a group of students is almost an escapist occupation in this, er, in this world of change, 'cause you know that when you're in there, they can't touch you.

P3: So did that make it, erm, a coping strategy?

P4: I think it contributed to a coping strategy. You know, here's another way, this is good, we can just push all this out of the way for the time being, and just focus on what we're doing. And it's er, it is a bit like being in a sauna, in a way, it's nice and comfortable in the sauna, and you come out and someone says 'You ought to go in the cold pool now' and the cold pool, of course, is the reality of the life of this place.

P3: But what do you think, if any, were the effects or the impact of all the stuff going on outside the set?

P4: Who knows? Erm, I don't think we brought them in with us. I don't think we brought them in as concerns, 'cause we were focused on our day to day work, so the actual stuff that's happening around us, I think was actually left outside the door. That's the value of the, certainly if you like, the therapeutic value of the activity, of the meeting is to actually put everything out of the way, say 'Right, we're getting away from that stuff now, we're gonna to focus on our main mission, our main work, and try and move that forward. So in a way, who cares what they're doing out there? And it's almost in hope that you do this, and I relate it to my own sort of work, in terms of writing and so on and so forth, and I can say this is something that's mine, and I can take this anywhere with me, it's portable. It's not related to this institution.
I can get away from any of that nonsense by just getting stuck into this. And I think in a sense, that a set of the sort we've had could be seen as a useful way of protecting oneself from the - I think if you made the topic of the set, you said, 'Right, today we're gonna talk about -- each person's gonna have 15 minutes to on how they're coping with the latest move to how to make us triangular rather than square. I mean, that would kill it, because we'd be focused on things that are dragging us back, and we really, you know, the value is you focus on things which are taking you forward, and therefore I think there is a psychological barrier against the institution.

P3: Just to come back to you on your earlier perceptions. For you, the main work was not in the content, but in the process. Your main work is being a professional learner.

P4: Yeah, that's it. And you build your solidarity.

P3: There's a heuristic purpose.

P4: Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

P3: Just one final question, [P4]; do you think – I mean, you've said that not transformative impact but possibly some transition

P4: It contributes to transition, yeah.

P3: Were there any factors that weakened the ability of the set to contribute to that transition?

P4: Yeah, I think sort of, er, the sporadic membership is always gonna be a problem, 'cause people are popping in and out, so you don't get that continuity. Erm, but again you know that's part of the way we are – isn't it, that's part of our life.

But apart from that, I can't - no, I don't think so, because these things have a drip-feed effect on you. This is long-term seeds sown, and, er they go on a long, long time. I don't, it's not a- that's why transformation always worries me, this magic wand.

P3: So on reflection do you think that, er, there were other ways that we could have done the set? As you started out by saying, it was a different format from the classic format.

P4: No, in fact I think the classic format is in fact totally unsuited to what we were doing. I think the variation is in fact a very powerful way of pulling things, of pulling people together and that's what brings about the sort of subtle changes in thinking and perception. I think it may well have contributed to - I think it's not a 'laager' mentality, that we have in a South African Boer sense in Inted, although we are under siege, almost - We're under siege because we're different. Because we see things differently, we do things differently. We have a completely different relationship within our department. I'd be fascinated to know what people perceive that is, from outside – whether they even notice it, or whether it's only something we notice, and we think 'We're under siege, it must be because we're different'.

P3: Does everyone perceive that we're under siege, though?

P4: Oh, I don't think there's a single member of this department who doesn't see themselves as, sort of, constantly under attack.

P3: People feel like that in other parts of the College.

P4: Oh, I think people feel under siege in different ways. You know, it's much more that we feel under siege – this is the key thing. I can imagine individual staff members saying 'Gosh, I feel under siege here', but not feeling a collective entity, and I think the set contributed, and will continue to contribute to a more, sort of, unified entity. You see the difficulty of trying to sort of get people networked across the College to do different things. There's a lot of suspicion about it, there's a lot of sort of territoriality about it. (Laughs) [A colleague in another School] keeps talking about, sort of 'We must have action learning sets in this College, and I'm prepared to facilitate one three times a year.' But I wonder what his vision of a -

P3: Well, I've asked him twice to join one.

P4: Yeah, and he's never turned up, has he?

P3: No.

P4: That's the thing! 'It's weird going into Inted'.

P3: Well, it wasn't specifically an Inted one, it was a Regional thing.

P4: Oh, right.

P3: [P4], has anything else come up on reflection that you would like to say on this before we end our interview?

P4: Well, one thing that has been a direct spin-off for me is that I've adopted a variation of this for teaching. So when I was in Pakistan last summer, teaching a module, erm, I was looking at different strategies of bringing staff together for development purposes and one of them was an action learning set, and I did another sort of slight variation on, on the model, and taught it to the group, and got them actually practising it there and then in the classroom and some of them have done assignments on it, so I'm - and set up sets in their own schools. So I'm waiting to see the assignments when they come in to see what the effect of that is and see what they're gonna report about their experience. So there's something replicable. Erm, you know I think it's a very valuable way of working, erm – it's stylised if you like and it's got a set procedure which may put a lot of people off, but I, I think you've gotta test it and try it and then realise that it's not inhibitory, in fact it's very - it's quite liberational. It can provide an opportunity to grow – if not to transform.

P3: Thanks, [P4].